World Soccer

GLOBAL FOOTBALL SINCE 1960

March 2016

COLLECTOR'S EDITION

THE 500 MOST IMPORTANT PLAYERS ON THE PLANET

The class of 2016

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✓ *Future stars*

+ PLUS

› China's revolution
› Euro 2016

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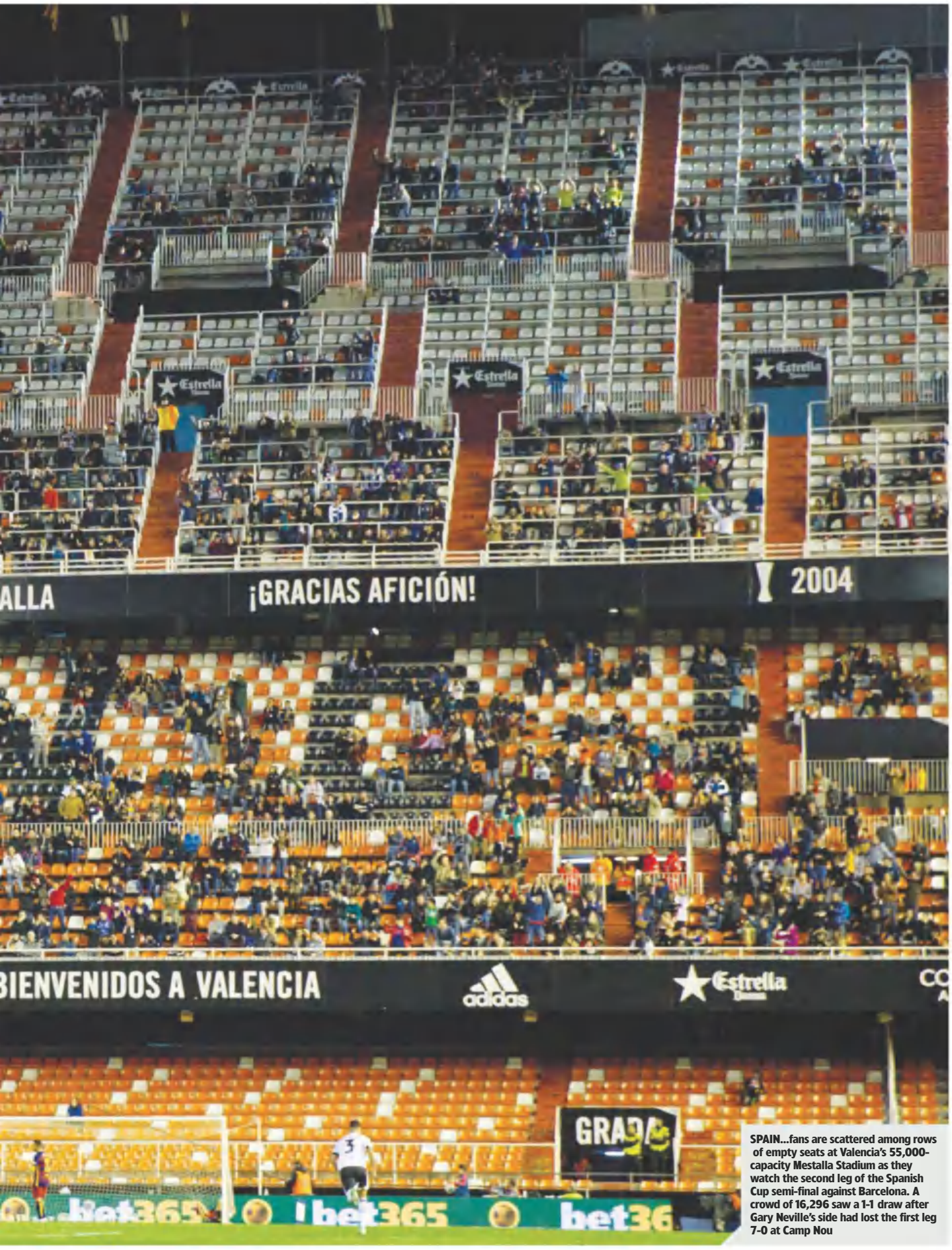
In Pictures

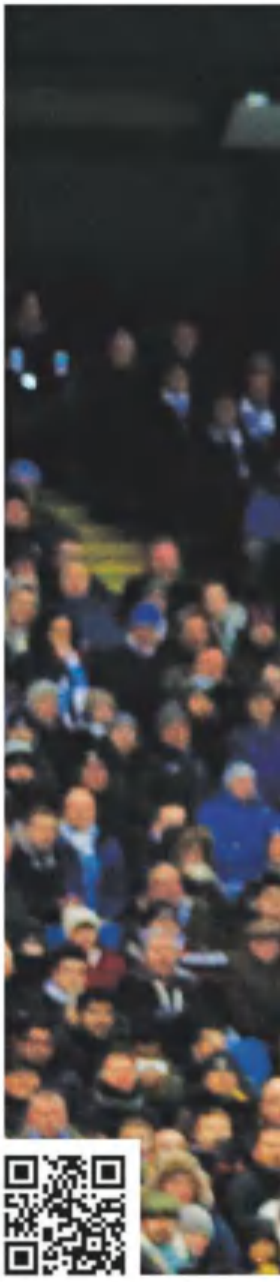
The global game caught on camera



SPAIN...fans are scattered among rows of empty seats at Valencia's 55,000-capacity Mestalla Stadium as they watch the second leg of the Spanish Cup semi-final against Barcelona. A crowd of 16,296 saw a 1-1 draw after Gary Neville's side had lost the first leg 7-0 at Camp Nou

VENEZUELA...members of the Venezuelan national guard observe the wreckage of the upturned Huracan team bus following a road accident en route to the airport after the Argentinian club's Libertadores Cup game against Caracas

AUSTRALIA...Newcastle Jets fans show their support in the sun during an A-League game against Perth Glory



USA...Mexico's Hirving Lozano (left) competes with Senegal's Matar Kante during a friendly in Miami

PICTURES OF THE MONTH QR CODE

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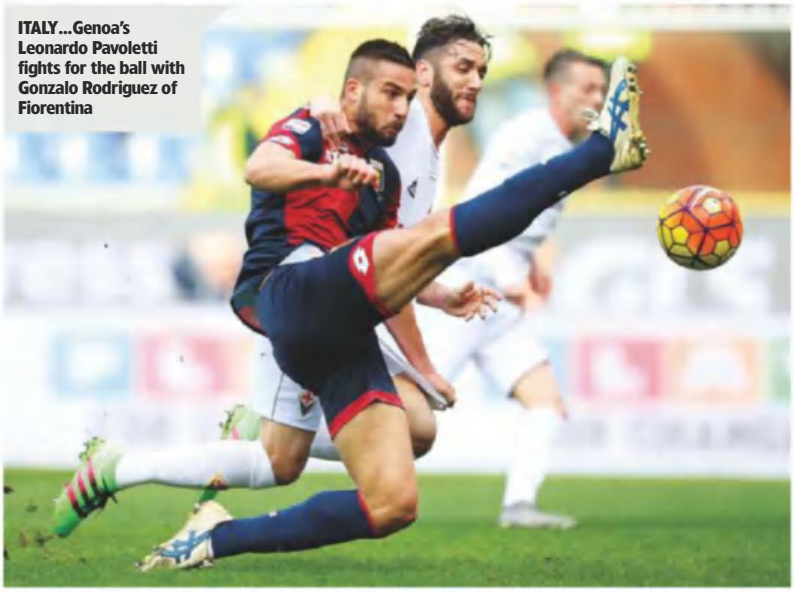
EGYPT...a Zamalek follower holds a flare during a rally in Cairo to commemorate the 22 people killed in clashes with local police last year



ITALY...Genoa's Leonardo Pavoletti fights for the ball with Gonzalo Rodriguez of Fiorentina

ENGLAND...Everton's Romelu Lukaku competes with Manchester City's Nicolas Otamendi and Fernandinho in the League Cup semi-final second leg

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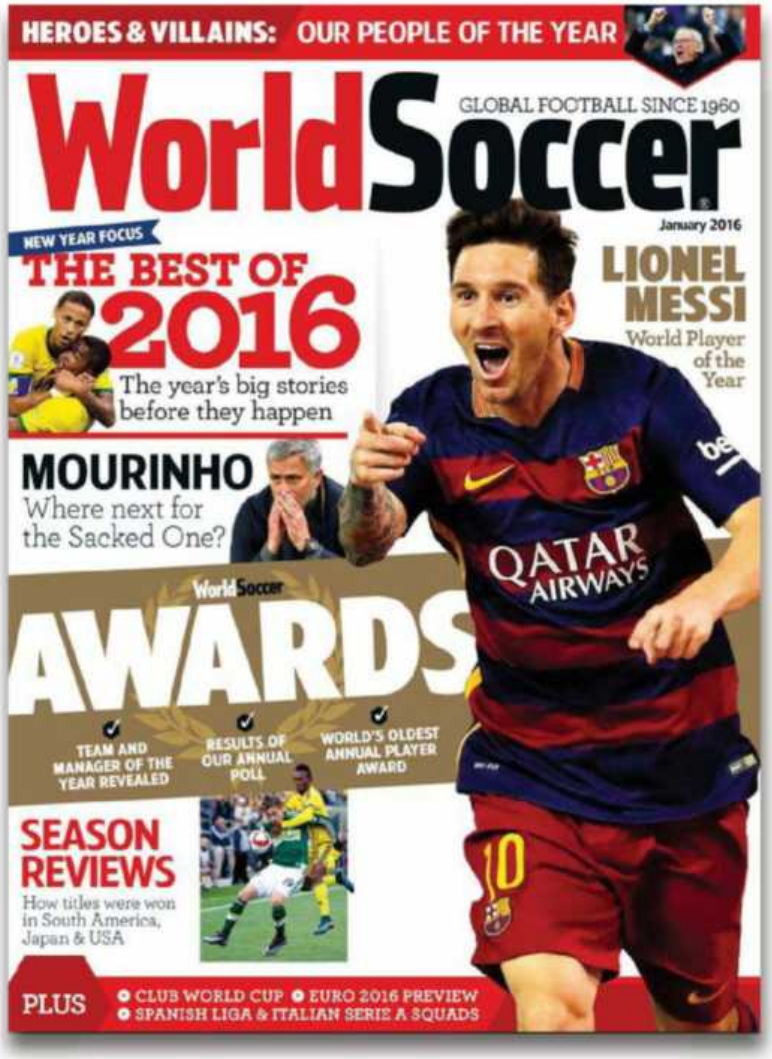

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FROM THE EDITOR

The footballing revolution in China (page 24) is not a new phenomenon. We have reported on big-money transfers to the Chinese league before. But the recent flurry of activity feels like a game-changer. Footballers have always followed the money – and there is potentially more money in China than any other country on the planet.

Perhaps we should have known that Sven Goran Eriksson would be ahead of the curve. He and the likes of Asamoah Gyan had been in China for some time before the recent spate of transfers. But it would be wrong to dismiss the Chinese league as a mere retirement home for those reaching the end of their careers in Europe. The sheer size and wealth of China begs us to take them seriously.

> The sheer size and wealth of China begs us to take them seriously

Last year's edition of the well-received WS500 (page 33) featured a number of players hired by the Chinese league. More are sure to follow.

The rise of the Chinese Super League will have an impact way beyond the transfer gossip columns. Major League Soccer (preview on page 112) has potentially the most to lose – though judging by the league's latest arrivals – any takers for Ashley Cole and Nigel De Jong? – it is already losing out.

Gavin Hamilton, Editor

10 SIGNIFICANT EVENTS THIS MONTH

1. Juventus beat Napoli to go top of Serie A ..... page 117
2. Major League Soccer kicks off ..... page 112
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7. Hoffenheim appoint Bundesliga's youngest-ever coach ..... page 14
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9. Higuain leads the ESM Golden Shoe rankings ..... page 124
10. Guardiola confirmed as new Man City boss ..... page 18

In Cyprus... Cristian Manea

ROMANIA

Confusion over status of teenage Chelsea 'loanee'

Cristian Manea, the 18-year-old Romanian full-back who was widely reported as having signed for Chelsea last summer, never joined the English side and his registration was instead transferred to Cypriot club Apollon Limassol.

According to an investigation by Romanian newspaper *ProSport*, Manea was sold by Viitorul Constanta, the club owned and coached by Gheorghe Hagi, to Apollon in June 2014. Apollon are owned by former agent Nicos Kirzis, who is a close associate of "superagent" Pini Zahavi.

In March 2015, it was said that Viitorul had agreed a deal of between £2m-3m for the teen to move to Chelsea. He would then be loaned to Belgian club Mouscron. In July 2015, Zahavi stepped in to save Mouscron from bankruptcy.

On Mouscron's official website, Manea is listed as being on loan from Chelsea. However, Manea has never appeared on Chelsea's list of loaned-out players. Instead, according to *ProSport*, his registration was sold to Apollon in a deal agreed with Hagi back in June 2014.

In recent weeks, Apollon have been involved in other controversial deals. In January 2016, highly rated Serb teen Luka Jovic, whose registration had been sold to Apollon by Red Star Belgrade, joined Benfica in a deal reported to be worth €5m.

Apollon were also reported to be involved in a dispute between another Serbian starlet, Andrija Zivkovic, and Partizan Belgrade (see page 92).

The deals are widely seen as ways for the owners of Apollon to bypass strict new regulations on Third Party Ownership.

John Holmesdale

"Dutch football officially has lost its innocence"

Dutch FA director Gijs De Jong sums it up perfectly after confirming that a game between Utrecht and Willem II in 2009 was fixed

HOLLAND

Dutch FA confirms league's first case of match-fixing

Attempts to fix the result of a Dutch league match seven years ago have been uncovered by a Dutch FA (KNVB) investigation.

It is the first time such a case has been established in Holland. The probe uncovered a bid by Ibrahim Kargbo, then a player at Willem II, to fix the outcome of a league match against Utrecht in August 2009 in co-operation with convicted Singaporean fraudster Wilson Raj Perumal.

"We have long warned this could happen in the Dutch league," said KNVB operational director Gijs De Jong. "But it is still difficult to swallow now that this has been established."

The KNVB said Kargbo had promised the then-captain Michael Aerts and a third, unidentified player would work together with him to throw the match against Utrecht in return for €25,000 each.

Accused... Ibrahim Kargbo

HEROES & VILLAINS

Protest...players in a Greek second division game

LARISSA & ACHARNAIKOS

Players and coaching staff of the two sides staged a sit-down protest at the start of their Greek second-tier game in memory of refugees who have lost heir lives in the Aegean Sea.

SALOMON KALOU

The Ivorian striker became the first player to score 10 goals or more in a single season in the top flights of England (Chelsea), France (Lille) and Germany (Hertha Berlin).

ALVARO BRACHI

Signed for Slovenian top-tier side Domzale after answering an advert seeking for an attacking right-back on social networking site LinkedIn.

CLAUDIO PIZARRO

The Peruvian became the first foreigner to make 400 Bundesliga appearances. Pizarro has played his games for just two German clubs: Werder Bremen and Bayern Munich.

Historic...Werder Bremen's Claudio Pizarro

ANIS BEN-HATIRA

Sold by Hertha Berlin to Eintracht Frankfurt in the transfer window after he attacked team-mate Mitchell Weiser on the Hertha team bus following a 3-3 draw away to Werder Bremen in the Bundesliga.

Row...Anis Ben-Hatira attacked a Hertha team-mate

LAZIO FANS

Referee Massimiliano Irrati had to stop Lazio's game against Napoli for three minutes after home supporters booed the visitors' Senegalese defender Kalidou Koulibaly whenever he touched the ball.

BOCA JUNIORS AND RIVER PLATE

During a pre-season friendly between the two arch Buenos Aires rivals, five players were sent off – three from Boca, two from River. Boca also had two players dismissed in their previous friendly, against Racing Club.

SERGE AURIER

The Ivorian defender was banned indefinitely by Paris Saint-Germain after making homophobic comments about his coach, Laurent Blanc, in an online video.

No defence...Serge Aurier is caught on camera

"PAOK is my team now and I fight for my team, even if it means a red card sometimes"

After being sent off for the first time in his career, Dimitar Berbatov interviews himself on Facebook

GOALS we'd like to see again

To see video footage of these goals, and many more that we have selected, scan the QR code using any free QR reader that can be downloaded to your smartphone. You can also see the videos by logging on to http://po.st/0DiVDN

1 DELE ALLI
Tottenham Hotspur v Crystal Palace
Controlling the ball with one touch from Christian Eriksen's cushioned header, he flicks it over the head of his opponent before swivelling to volley home into the bottom corner of the net.

2 ALVARO CEJUDO
Real Betis v Real Madrid
A swift break from Betis appears to break down when a goal-bound shot balloons into the air. However, when the ball is then nodded back to Cejudo, he hammers home a stunning effort on the volley.

3 ANASS ACHAHBAR
Feyenoord v Heerenveen
A spectacular bicycle kick in the middle of a packed penalty area flies into the roof of the net.

4 YAO SERGE N'GUESSAN
Ivory Coast v Cameroon
Runs from inside his own half before unleashing a dipping shot from inside the centre circle that clears the keeper.

5 JAMIE VARDY
Leicester City v Liverpool
Stunning first-time effort that dips over the goalkeeper and into the net.

6 MILOS STOJCEV
Atromitos v Panathinaikos
Some fantastic touchline trickery, followed by a pin-point cross to the far post is volleyed home in this Greek Cup match.

WINNERS

PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN
Set a new record of 33 consecutive Ligue 1 games unbeaten with a 3-1 victory over Lorient.

DR CONGO
African Nations Championship winners for a second time, they beat Mali 3-0 in the Final of the tournament that features only players who are based in Africa.

GARY NEVILLE
At the 10th time of asking, the Valencia coach finally won a game in La Liga as his side beat Espanyol 2-1.

LOSERS

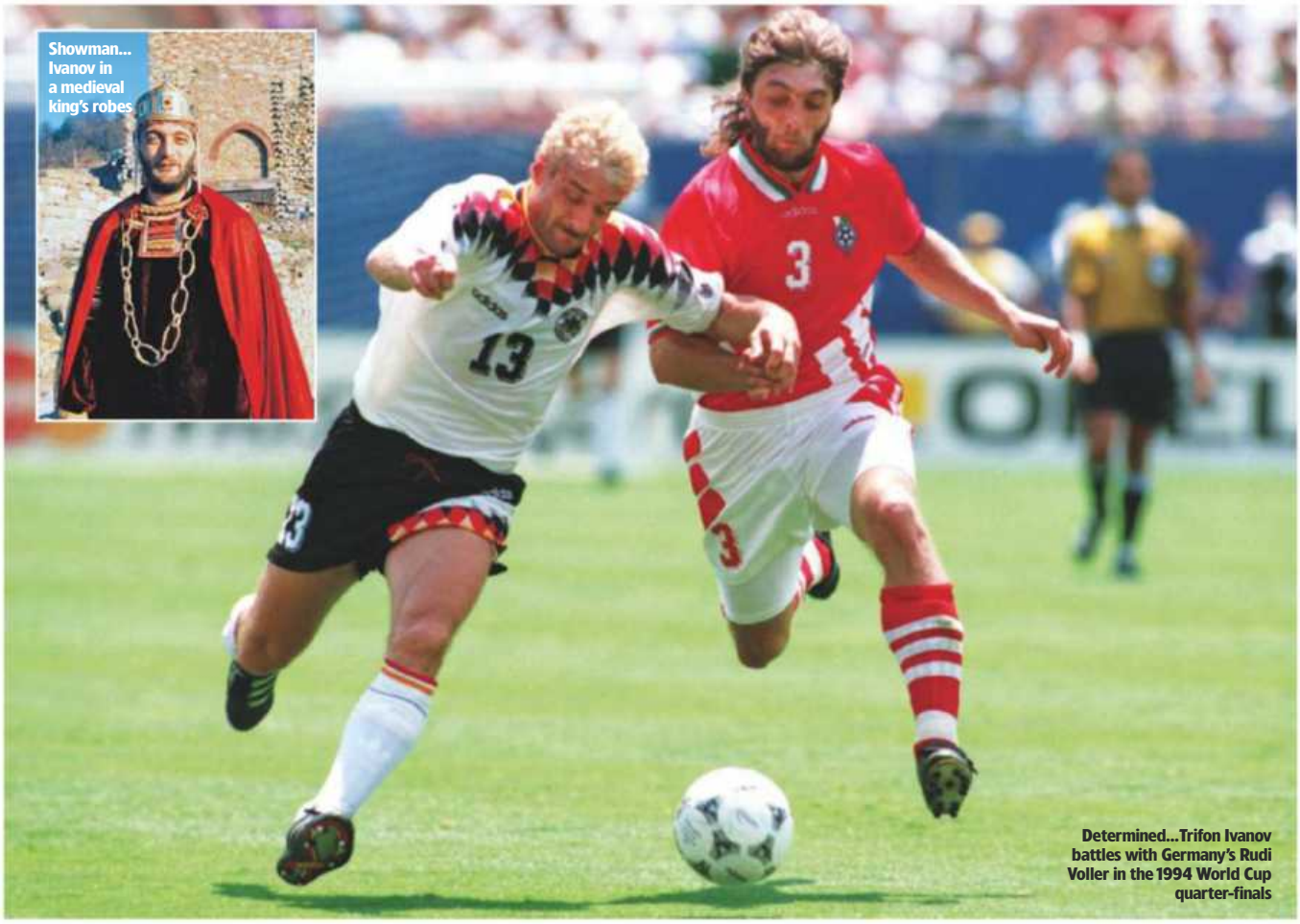
FEYENOORD
Seven straight league defeats for the Rotterdam club was their worst run of all time.

GUILLERMO BARROS SCHELOTTO
Stood down as boss of Palermo as he was unable to gain the necessary UEFA coaching licence.

MIDO
Sacked after just 37 days as coach of Egyptian champions Zamalek following a 2-0 loss to arch-rivals Al Ahly.

"You always looked grim-faced, but you had the biggest heart and always was prepared to listen to others"

Ex-Neuchatel Xamax forward Petar Aleksandrov (right) pays tribute to his friend Trifon Ivanov



Showman... Ivanov in a medieval king's robes

Determined...Trifon Ivanov battles with Germany's Rudi Voller in the 1994 World Cup quarter-finals

OBITUARIES

Trifon IVANOV (1965-2016)
Centre-half in the Bulgaria side that made the semi-finals of the 1994 World Cup, he won 77 caps for his country and was a Cup-winners Cup runner-up with Rapid Vienna in 1996. He died suddenly from a heart attack, aged 50, and his funeral in the northern Bulgarian city of Veliko Tarnovo was attended by team-mates from the 1994 national team, including Hristo Stoichkov.

Peter BAKER (1931-2016)
Right-back in Tottenham Hotspur's 1961 double-winning side, he was also an FA Cup winner in 1962 and a European Cup-winners Cup winner the following year. Played 299 league games for Spurs after being signed from non-league Enfield in 1952 and later managed Durban United in South Africa.

Anatoli ILYIN (1931-2016)
A Soviet Top League title winner five times with Spartak Moscow, he scored the only goal of the game as the Soviet Union beat Yugoslavia to win Olympic gold in 1956. He was capped 31 times by his country between 1952 and 1969, scoring 16 times, and was also credited with scoring the first-ever European Championship qualifying goal, in a 3-1 victory over Hungary in 1958.

Suat MAMAT (1930-2016)
Scored Turkey's first-ever goal at the World Cup finals, in a 4-1 defeat by West Germany in 1954. He played a total of 27 times for his country and spent much of his career at Galatasaray, where he scored 95 times in 278 league appearances between 1952 and 1964.

Ray POINTER (1936-2016)
Burnley's second-highest scorer of all time with 132 goals, he played a big part in the club's 1960 title success and was an FA Cup runner-up two years later. Won three caps for England, scoring twice.

League champion ...Ray Pointer

Winner...Peter Baker (third left) joins in Spurs' 1961 FA Cup Final celebration

"I was told by the coach that he was a Ferrari, only for him to end up being the Ferrari which stays in the garage"

Porto president Pinto Da Costa offers an automotive take on the short, unhappy stint of French midfielder Giannelli Imbula (left) at the club

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

Appointments, sackings and loans

IN

Club role...Ruud Van Nistelrooy will join PSV

EUROPE

To the surprise of no one, it was confirmed that **PEP GUARDIOLA** will replace Manuel Pellegrini and become head coach of Manchester City when he leaves Bayern Munich at the end of the season.

BEPPE IACHINI was reinstated as Serie A side Palermo's seventh coach of the season.

Russia captain **ROMAN SHIROKOV** joined CSKA Moscow on a six-month deal after the midfielder's contract with Spartak Moscow was ended by mutual consent in January.

RUUD VAN NISTELROOY will leave his post as assistant to Holland boss Danny Blind in the summer and join the coaching staff at PSV.

FREDERIC HANTZ was put in charge of Montpellier following the departure of Rolland Courbis. **FRANCOIS CICCOLINI** replaced Ghislain Printant as coach of Bastia until the end of the Ligue 1 season.

SOUTH AMERICA

Brazil striker **ROBINHO** returned home after leaving China's Guangzhou Evergrande and signed a two-year deal with Atletico Mineiro.

Chile appointed **JUAN ANTONIO PIZZI** as national coach Jorge Sampaoli's replacement.

JORGE DA SILVA replaced Pablo Bengoechea as coach of Penarol ahead of the start of the new Uruguayan clausura.

CONCACAF

New York Cosmos signed midfielder **JUAN ARANGO**, who is Venezuela's most-capped player and leading goalscorer, from Tijuana of Mexico

AFRICA

Former Zambia and Ivory Coast boss **HERVE RENARD** replaced Badou Zaki as coach of Morocco.

Belgian coach **HUGO BROOS** was named coach of Cameroon, replacing Volker Fink, who was sacked in October.

Former Portugal defender **ABEL XAVIER** was appointed boss of Mozambique, while **SANG NDONG** took charge of Gambia for a second time (see page 122).

MOHAMED SALAH was appointed interim coach of Egyptian champions Zamalek after they sacked Ahmed "Mido" Hossam.

ASIA

Chinese side Jiangsu Suning signed **ALEX TEIXEIRA** from Shakhtar Donetsk of Ukraine for an Asian record of €50m.

TOTCHTAWAN SRIPAN, who won 109 caps for Thailand, was named coach of Muangthong United ahead of their AFC Champions League qualifying campaign.

Resigned...Zdravko Mamic has quit Dinamo Zagreb

Mystery over Mamic departure

ZDRAVKO MAMIC, who is under investigation over profits made from transfers, resigned as chief executive of Croatian league leaders Dinamo Zagreb.

However, it was unclear who would replace him, or whether he would continue to run the club under another guise.

Record...at 28, Julian Nagelsmann has made history

Youngest Bundesliga boss

Bundesliga strugglers Hoffenheim confirmed 28-year-old **JULIAN NAGELSMANN** as coach to replace Huub Stevens, 62, who resigned because of ill health. Nagelsmann had been due to take over at the end of the season.

Hoffenheim were second from bottom of the table with 15 points from 21 games.

OUT

EUROPE

Sunderland sacked former England winger **ADAM JOHNSON**, who they signed from Manchester City for £10m in 2012, after he pleaded guilty to one count of sexual activity with a child and one charge of grooming.

Internazionale and Serbia defender **NEMANJA VIDIC**, who won the 2008 Champions League and five Premier League titles with Manchester United, announced his retirement at the age of 34. Ajax's former Holland defender **JOHN HEITINGA**, 32, also retired.

ERIK HAMREN will leave his post as Sweden coach when his contract expires at the end of Euro 2016.

ASIA

Italy's World Cup winning captain in 2006, **FABIO CANNAVARO** was sacked after just four months as coach of defending Saudi Arabian champions Al Nassr.

Over...Nemanja Vidic has retired

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Point at issue...Brazil's Thiago Silva appears to handle during a Copa America quarter-final against Paraguay

The cameras are coming: video assistance set for landmark decision

Never a weekend goes by in the Premier League maelstrom without one manager or another raging over a referee's decision. Managers will never cease chasing excuses for themselves or their players, but the opportunities to blame everything on the man with the whistle will be significantly reduced if the game's lawmakers take a decisive step towards a brave new world.

> Several federations have hinted they are willing to experiment

On March 5, delegates of the four British home nations and the tottering FIFA meet in Cardiff, as the International Football Association Board (IFAB), to consider approving a two-year experiment in video assistance for referees.

Six of the eight votes are needed for approval. Given the home nations all expressed conditional approval at the lawmakers' annual meeting in London in January – and that the refereeing advisers are all in favour – any further hold-up is highly unlikely.

FIFA holds four votes, hence obstructive potential, and the new president may have his own views. But none of the candidates to the presidential succession of disgraced Sepp Blatter have spoken up in opposition to video assistance, so it would demand a piece of deliberate mischief to throw a spanner in the works at this stage. Once video assistance has been tested, refined and then approved – in, say, three years' time – football would fall into line with a string of other sports that have wrestled with the unexpected challenges of technological innovation.

Football's loyalty to the original Laws of the Game has been a strength, providing priceless continuity and stability down the decades, on all pitches from the World Cup to the local rec.

Of course, these relate to how the game is played; video technology relates to the manner in which it is played. Restrictions will be drawn around "action points" such as goals, red cards, penalties and identification issues. Inevitably, pressure will build to extend the range of issues. At every point, on and off the pitch, players and managers push the boundaries – and "live technology" will be no exception.

This was the root of Michel Platini's original objection to the introduction of goal-line technology. When still president of UEFA, he once told me: "I do not oppose goal-line technology for its own sake. I oppose all technology. If we allow goal-line technology then it will be the first step on a slippery slope. People will always want more and then more."

Platini was correct. Goal-line technology made its World Cup debut in 2014 and video assistance is likely to appear at the finals in 2022. Indeed, it may even play a role at the European Championship in 2020.

Not that video assistance will be failproof – as several incidents at the Rugby World Cup in England last autumn proved. Some decisions will always remain a matter of subjective opinion. Inside or outside the penalty area? Foul or dive? Deliberate handball or accidental?

The initial impetus behind video assistance came from Holland, with the Dutch federation leading the way in an unofficial experimentation. Last spring, IFAB delayed a decision on official trials pending the further discussion which has now been undertaken.

The decision-makers pushing for history in January were Jonathan Ford, chief executive of the Football Association of Wales, Stewart Regan (Scottish FA), Patrick Nelson (Irish FA), Martin Glenn (chief executive of the Football Association) and Markus Kattner (acting FIFA secretary-general), advised by former FIFA referee David Elleray, a member of IFAB's technical sub-committee.

One key issue is whether a video check can be made only at a break in play or during an active phase of play. Also open for experiment is whether the referee is supported by a video assistant at pitch-side or up in the stand. This is likely to be one of the variations for the trials.

The need to consider extensive data from at least two seasons means the earliest possible date for an IFAB "yes" would be the spring of 2018. Since IFAB decisions are generally enacted in July, video assistance will not be applicable at the World Cup finals in Russia. Hence the summer of 2019 is more likely.

Several national federations have hinted they are willing to experiment. The FA may propose next season's FA Cup but the Premier League may be more ambitious, particularly with the Bundesliga having thrown its hat into the ring.

The Germans, left behind in the rush to domestic goal-line technology, have no wish to be seen playing catch-up again. WS

Paul GARDNER

THE WORLDWIDE VIEW

Still farce and slapstick as IFAB prune the rule book

Change for the better...a fourth substitute may be allowed in extra time

I have never considered any meeting of the International Football Association Board (IFAB) to be one of the world's great news events because so little actually happens or gets done.

But things may be changing. We shall find out at IFAB's March AGM in Cardiff. After that, I may have to eat my words because it seems that IFAB will be eating a whole mountain of its own. We are promised a revised, and much less wordy, revision of the rule book.

> A corner kick taken by the goalkeeper? When did you last see that?

In fact, it is a reduction in wordage so drastic that I still cannot see how it can be accomplished. They're telling us the current rule book contains some 22,000 words, and that 10,000 of them will bite the dust.

The actual rules, all 17 of them, contain only about 8,000 words. So they must also be including the subsidiary "Interpretations and Guidelines" sections – that would get us up to 22,000. There is, for sure, some overlap and repetition among the rules and those sections, but nowhere near enough to account for the 10,000 words being killed off.

We've had hints from David Elleray, the former Premier League referee overseeing the slaughter, and who said "We have tried to use much clearer language. We tried to avoid a lot of unnecessary repetition and tried to make it up to date."

Worthy intentions, of course. We shall see. In the meantime, there are a few specific changes that definitely will be made in Cardiff – and they do not do anything to change my mind that IFAB is simply not a "with it" body.

There is, for instance, to be a change in the procedure for the shoot-out tie-breaker (officially "kicks from the penalty mark").

About time, say I – only to discover that this is the wrong change. They're saying that "if a player gets red carded" during the shoot-out... and they might as well stop right there. How many times does that happen? I don't recall ever seeing it.

So they're fussing over a rare occurrence when they should be revising the order in which the kicks are taken. Reliable research has shown that the current AB AB AB AB AB sequence gives something like a 60-40 advantage to the team kicking first. Which means winning the toss and electing to kick first is a huge factor. Clearly, that makes the shoot-out, already a questionable procedure, even more dubious. An alternative, fairer, sequence – AB BA AB BA AB, as used in the tennis tie-break – has been suggested. But IFAB seems never to have heard of any of this.

Word has finally got through to IFAB – possibly from this column, I've been banging on about it for years – that it makes no sense at all to insist that the ball has to move forward at a kick-off. The requirement will be dropped. Another suggestion – that I first made 12 years ago – reappears in that a fourth substitute be allowed in extra-time. It was turned down last year, as usual without explanation.

And now for the comic ending. An episode of high farce that IFAB has orchestrated and been hiding in the rules for 20 years. Hiding in full view. It happens to be the very last item in the current rules, and inevitably it involves the goalkeeper. Rule 17 ends with an item headed "Corner kick taken by the goalkeeper."

Eh? When did you last see that? I'm quite sure I've never seen it, and I've been football gazing since the 1940s. The farce quickly turns into hilarious slapstick. We get this: "If, after the ball is in play, the goalkeeper deliberately handles the ball before it is touched by another player...an indirect free kick is awarded to the opposing team if the infringement occurred inside the goalkeeper's penalty area..."

So, the goalkeeper deliberately aims the corner kick back to his own goal, 100 yards away – or maybe makes the most spectacular miskick in the history of football – then races the length of the field back to his area, beating any opponent who also gives chase (and who would certainly have a yard or two advantage)... then gives up a free kick by handling the ball.

And there was I thinking that IFAB were a humourless bunch. My apologies guys. But how sad that your joke will now be cut, part of the 10,000 words to be eliminated. This hilarity will surely go. I mean, it will, won't it...? WS

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Jim HOLDEN

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

Rugby coach offers impressive Pep talk

Eddie Jones, the vastly experienced coach of England's rugby union team, is full of awe for the sporting manager he admires above all others: Pep Guardiola.

Normally, the two codes are uneasy bedfellows – which only serves to emphasise the reverence across the world of sport for Guardiola as he prepares to become the manager of Manchester City next season.

Jones has spoken of how he had gone to Bayern Munich to study the work of the master of soccer. "It was absolutely fascinating to watch Guardiola doing a training session," he explained. "He was so bloody brilliant; and watching him work I was embarrassed by the standard of my own coaching.

"I had an hour and a half with Guardiola, talking about his philosophy, about how you move the football in space. Rugby is like football. You want to have a formation so that the players know where to go – how to move in relation to where the ball is, how the ball moves and what the defence does.

"Guardiola told me he is a big rugby fan. He studies rugby and handball to look at how you move the ball into space."

The master...Pep Guardiola at work

The sentiments reveal why Manchester City are so thrilled to have secured the services of Guardiola. They also reveal why high-class current boss Manuel Pellegrini has accepted his exit with such dignity, and why the rest of the Premier League giants are so anxious about the Spaniard's arrival.

Guardiola is simply the best. He has proved it at Barcelona and Bayern, and it is the wishful thinking of fools to believe that his brilliance will be dulled by the nature of English football.

How will he cope with demands of a heavy and relentless fixture schedule? Well, just the same way he did at Barca, where the pressure to succeed was even more ferocious.

> "He was so bloody brilliant; and watching him work I was embarrassed by the standard of my own coaching"
> Eddie Jones

The essence of Guardiola's regime is not so much the style – though that is forever magnificent – but energy, work rate and discipline. What transfixed Jones more than anything was the intensity of the training he witnessed, the buckets of sweat pouring from the bodies of the World Cup-winning superstars such as Thomas Muller.

Will Guardiola prove a success at Manchester City? Of course he will. The real question is how City's rivals in the Premier League respond – particularly Chelsea, after a dismal campaign, and Manchester United, who have struggled under the cautious martinet management of Louis Van Gaal.

Arsenal will trust for a 20th year in Arsene Wenger. That we know. They did not covet Guardiola; it was the wrong moment for them.

Chelsea did want Guardiola, but found him out of reach and are now searching for the next best, debating the merits and availability of a fine cast including Massimiliano Allegri, Jorge Sampaoli, Diego Simeone and Mauricio Pochettino. For the first time since oil billionaire Roman Abramovich bought the club, they appear uncertain of their direction.

The smart money seems to suggest that United will respond to Guardiola's arrival by employing Jose Mourinho to replay the intense battles these two fought in Spain while at Barcelona and Real Madrid. It would certainly give United equal billing in the publicity stakes – which would boost the club's precious share price – even if it could not bring parity or superiority on the field of play.

It would also be a captivating spectacle for the neutral for as long as Mourinho could keep from self-combusting.

Whether it would be in the best interests of Manchester United is quite another matter.

Mourinho's brand of managerial mayhem is not in the style of the club and surely they would be better served by the appointment of one of their own in Ryan Giggs. That, after all, is how Pep Guardiola began at Barcelona. WS

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Brian GLANVILLE

THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

Why does it have to be Mourinho? Why not Giggs?

On the face of it, the question must seem bizarre. Yet I don't think it is, even though Louis Van Gaal insists he may be staying, and Ed Woodward the foremost executive, who admires him, won't confirm the Dutchman is on his way.

Jose Mourinho himself seems convinced that his deal is virtually done and dusted. He will take over Manchester United next season. But would it work?

There can be no doubt that he is always potentially a divisive figure and at Chelsea this season he emphatically lost the commitment of his players. That is ominous since the chief criticism of Van Gaal's reign this season has been that United have betrayed their great tradition of attacking football, with all their huge expenditure on players looking all too often prosaic and oddly ineffective.

Mourinho, despite his past glittering success with so many clubs, is hardly the architect of teams which play with flair, adventure and panache. If indeed he does come to Old Trafford, will the team's style satisfy the fans who warmed to Alex Ferguson's committed teams?

Plainly enough, United must be worried by the fact that Manchester City have acquired Pep Guardiola to manage them next season and would thus be fearful of opposing him with any but a manager of similar stature. But Mourinho just might no longer be that man.

Ryan Giggs would be a gamble, but one which might come off. After all, he has already run the team for short periods, not without success. He is imbued with the trust of Manchester United, to which, as an outstanding talent, he so greatly contributed. A gamble? No doubt, but what would Mourinho's appointment be? And after his success at the World Cup with Holland, didn't Van Gaal's look like a sound and reliable choice?

Meanwhile, we still don't know whether United will scrape into the European Champions Cup. If they don't, all those promised millions for the transfer market will make it difficult to buy the stars they covet, Mourinho or no Mourinho.

> Mourinho, despite his past glittering success, is hardly the architect of teams which play with flair and panache

Contenders...Jose Mourinho (left) and Ryan Giggs

Chinese follow America as football's latest Pied Piper

In football terms, at least, China is a study in parasitism. Its own footballers are largely anonymous but the leading clubs are colossally rich. And so we have a succession of star players, both European and South American, responding to the Pied Piper lure of dizzying contracts.

The richest Chinese clubs have moved on alarmingly from the botched transfers of Nicolas Anelka and Didier Drogba, who joined Shanghai Shenhua for supposed fortunes which didn't even, it seems, get paid. They were soon away.

But now Corinthians of Sao Paulo, to their bitter resentment, have lost no fewer than four of the players who helped them win the Brazilian league last year. Chelsea were paid a fortune for transferring another Brazilian international, Ramires, though in his case he was no longer an essential first-team player.

There are comparisons with what happened in the earlier era of United States soccer, when – with the coruscating exception of the New York Cosmos of Pele, Beckenbauer, Carlos Alberto and Chinaglia – the league was accurately termed an "elephants' graveyard", where burnt-out players went to end their careers. Not so now, when the leading American clubs are producing plenty of talent of their own, even if the USA's 2014 World Cup team had many players of American fathers but German mothers, having cut their teeth on German football.

Different class...Pele (right) and Franz Beckenbauer helped New York Cosmos rule the roost in US soccer

It seems the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, is encouraging the development of the game, if development it can be.

Certainly there is no comparison with Japanese football, where the level is high and gifted players emerge in high numbers, many of them coming to Europe. Japan has a resourceful national team, China's is feeble. But Chinese money talks – and now there is a big amount of it invested in Manchester City.

Premier League greed: something has to give

When the Premier League was formed, I immediately christened it "The Greed Is Good" league, and after recent encouraging events among disenchanted fans I see no reason to change my mind.

The Premier League is, as we know, about to receive the vast benefits of the new £8.3billion television contract. Players' salaries, already vertiginously high, are in increasingly stark contrast with the grasping treatment of the fans, whose financial contribution, it has now been surmised, has become almost irrelevant.

In such circumstances, all hail to the Liverpool supporters who marched out of Anfield during a recent match against Sunderland after 77 minutes, the £77 per ticket for next season's dearest seats being the last straw. And this in a city which has been down on its economic luck for so many blighted years.

Success...Liverpool fans forced the club into a climbdown over ticket prices

Liverpool's American owners grovelled in surrender to the bold fans almost immediately, issuing a long, cringing statement of self-abasing apology. The predictable sequel has been that fans from other clubs have been agitating too, not least those at Arsenal, where the prices are breathlessly high.

It is known that the average age of fans in the Premier League is somewhere in the 40s, which could point to a bleak future for the clubs even if the television money could enable them to weather future falls in crowd numbers.

For the moment, clubs such as Arsenal can get away with their excessive prices, but the natives there are increasingly restless.

Something, surely, has got to give.

Valcke warning was there for all to see

FIFA has extended substantially the ban on Jerome Valcke for his various malfeasances. But cast your mind back a few years to the New York court where Valcke, then a medium executive, and greedy Chuck Blazer were admonished by the female judge for their false evidence against MasterCard, to the World Cup benefit of Visa.

Remember, too, that Valcke went back to Switzerland, was briefly demoted, then popped up as number two to Sepp Blatter. Nobody among FIFA's member nations objected. But then Joao Havelange stayed in presidential office for those 24 villainous years.

Meanwhile, corrupt Russia are still putting on the next World Cup and repellent little Qatar still so far have the next one. It's not just FIFA; alas, the problem is football itself.

In disgrace...Jerome Valcke

Garde deserves our sympathy

Not for the first time have Aston Villa lost at home by a six-goal margin. But at least when Arsenal crushed them there in December 1935 they managed to score in a 7-1 defeat, with all seven Arsenal goals going to their centre-forward Ted Drake, who also hit the crossbar.

Some sympathy is in order for the ex-Gunner now obliged to manage Villa, Remi Garde. He was perhaps ill advised to take the job, but his attempts to strengthen his ailing team have met with obduracy by the Villa hierarchy. The word is that the hierarchy of this American-owned club are unwilling to spend money when it seems bound for the second division, alias the Championship.

So the likes of Debuchy and Doumbia have been denied Garde. They and the other possible arrivals might indeed not have been able to save Villa from going down, but they could well have helped them to go up again, something which could well be beyond the present squad.

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The great leap forward

John Duerden reports

A revolution is taking place in Chinese football. A combination of government ambition and private finance has produced a series of high-profile, record-breaking transfers as clubs compete to hire big-name players

In 2012, Nicolas Anelka and Didier Drogba signed for Shanghai Shenhua amid great fanfare in China and everywhere else. Yet majority owner Zhu Jun had an online game to promote, and a power battle with other shareholders to engage in, and he struggled to pay the stars who swiftly returned west. For some it was proof that the Middle Kingdom was not yet a place for the big stars.

This time, it is different. That's not to say that there will not be individual issues in the much larger and more recent influx – Gervinho and Ezequiel Lavezzi may find that the far northeastern city of Qinhuangdao is much tougher to settle in compared with the cosmopolitan and

Backing...fans of Beijing Guoan

modern metropolis that is Shanghai – but this is a more sustained and sustainable wave of spending by Chinese Super League clubs.

It is also no standing start. Even a decade ago the league was nowhere near as bad as has been made out, and in recent years it has improved. With an average attendance of over 22,000 in 2015, it was already one of the most watched in the world and only just behind France and Italy. Those countries will surely be overtaken in the coming season.

The facilities are often fantastic, the stadiums large and modern, and the passion for the game palpable. Football is already the most popular sport, though basketball – buoyed by the success of Yao Ming, a Shenhua fan – has run it close in recent years.

But that is mainly because the country has been starved of success by its true love. If the world's most populous nation could actually be a global football force... well, nobody knows what would happen, but the spending is part of a wider push to provide that opportunity.

The amounts paid for some players make Premier League clubs look restrained. But when you are an emerging league far from the traditional centres of football power, you have to pay over the odds to attract talent.

It remains to be seen whether Jiangsu Suning paying Chelsea £25million for Ramires and over £35m to outbid Liverpool for Alex Teixiera, and Guangzhou Evergrande – winner of the last five league titles – spending £32m on Jackson Martinez from Atletico Madrid (a Chinese team buying a player from a part-Chinese owned team) is good business.

And then there are Shanghai Shenhua landing Fredy Guarin from Internazionale and chasing Wesley Sneijder; Shanghai SIPG with £35m-plus strike force in Asamoah Gyan and Elkeson; and even newly promoted teams like Hebei raiding European giants such as Roma and Paris Saint-Germain. The likelihood is that some stars will shine and others will not, especially as the likes of Jiangsu have taken a scatter-gun approach to transfers.

The spending is not likely to slow down and the fire had already spread to the domestic transfer market. In January, second-tier Tianjin paid around £7m to Jiangsu for Sun Ke, a 26-year-old winger. Not only is China paying more than other countries for overseas talent – only the English Premier League outbid even the Middle Kingdom's second tier in the winter transfer window – their clubs are paying more for domestic players. This is partly because with each squad allowed to have only five foreign players (of which four can play at any one time), having the best Chinese talent, as Guangzhou have had over the years, is also crucial.

The money comes from various sources: private, public, provincial and national. Many clubs in the Chinese Super League are backed by companies that made their money in the property market, such as Evergrande and Greenland, who own Shanghai Shenhua. With the real estate

Success...Guangzhou Evergrande celebrate their Club World Cup quarter-final win over Mexico's Club America

The big players

Foreign stars in China's Super League

JIANGSU SUNING
Alex Teixeira
Ramires
Jo
Sammir
Trent Sainsbury

GUANGZHOU EVERGRANDE
Jackson Martinez
Paulinho
Ricardo Goulart
Alan Carvalho

HEBEI CHINA FORTUNE
Gervinho
Gael Kakuta
Stephane Mbia
Ezequiel Lavezzi

SHANGHAI SIPG
Asamoah Gyan
Elkeson
Dario Conca

SHANGHAI SHENHUA
Demba Ba
Momo Sissoko
Giovanni Moreno
Fredy Guarin
Avraam Papadopoulos
Obafemi Martins

Beach life... Jackson Martinez in Dubai for pre-season training

Welcome...new signing Ramires is greeted by Jiangsu Suning supporters after his move from Chelsea

Night action...Beijing Guoan take on Tianjin Teda in the Super League

SHANDONG LUNENG
Gil
Diego Tardelli
Walter Montillo

BEIJING GUOAN
Burak Yilmaz
Renato Augusto
Ralf

CHANGCHUN YATAI
Marcelo Martins Moreno

CHONGQING LIFAN
Emmanuel Gigliotti

LIAONING
Ibrahima Toure
James Troisi

TIANJIN TEDA
Fredy Montero
Wagner

HANGZHOU GREENTOWN
Anselmo Ramon
Matthew Spiranovic

HENAN JIANYE
Ryan McGowan

SHIJIAZHUANG EVER BRIGHT
Mario Rondon
Ruben Micael

SECOND DIVISION
Jadson *(Tianjin Quanjian)*
Luis Fabiano *(Tianjin Quanjian)*
Zvjezdan Misimovic *(Beijing Renhe)*
Nikica Jelavic *(Beijing Renhe)*

boom a thing of the past, most companies are now big enough and diverse enough not to be seriously affected by downturns. Suning took over Jiangsu late in 2015 and the retail group, with over 1,000 stores across the country, has been hugely active. Hebei is owned by an industrial park construction company.

Off the pitch, too, there is greater Chinese involvement in football businesses – and not just the recent £275m purchase of a 13 per cent stake in Manchester City's parent company City Football Group. In February 2015, Wanda, a massive company owned by Atletico Madrid part-owner Wang Jianlian, bought Swiss sports marketing company Infront Sports & Media. Gestifute, the company of Portuguese super agent Jorge Mendes, is now 50 per cent Chinese owned.

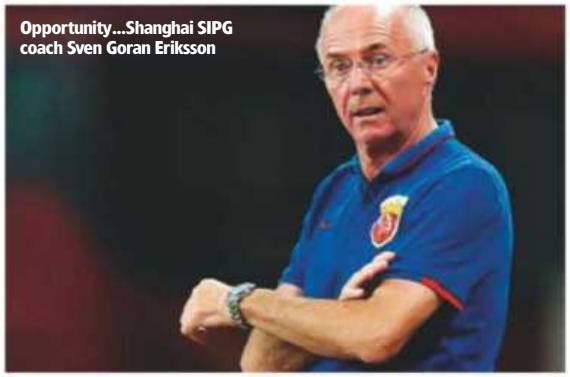
Investment off the pitch at home is growing. Television rights for the 2015 Chinese Super League season went for just over £1m. In 2016, that will be around £170m as part of a new five-year deal worth in the region of £850m, amounts unheard of in all of Asia and most of the world. More and more wealth will slide down the ladder. It also gives the league a lustre in the eyes of the brand-conscious youth who had turned to other sports, leagues or pastimes. It gives a greater profile (the domestic media has had a great time repeating every vague Chinese-related transfer rumour to appear in the UK press) and will help to forge a genuine football culture that has been lacking in the past.

> "Man City is not a random buy. They have the Etihad Campus, the model the Chinese want to follow"
> **Simon Chadwick of Coventry University Business School**

Eager...Xi Jinping

Why the private sector has become involved is partly explained by the fact that president Xi Jinping made it clear even before he took the top job in 2013 that more failure on the world stage (the nation has appeared in one World Cup and all

three games in 2002 were lost) was not an option. With the government starting to get behind Chinese football, it can be expedient for the private sector to do their bit too. It is not just that. The transfer market has taken on a life of its own with clubs competing to outdo each other and all striving to catch Guangzhou Evergrande and stop the Cantonese club making it six successive domestic titles.


Opportunity...Shanghai SIPG coach Sven Goran Eriksson

Guangzhou were the first Super League club to spend heavily. Even before January, it had spent more than £100m in five years on coaches, first Marcello Lippi and now Luiz Felipe Scolari, and players such as Robinho, Paulinho and Ricardo Goulart. As well as securing domestic dominance, the signings also fired the team to a second Asian Champions League in three years. Rivals such as Shanghai SIPG brought in Sven Goran Eriksson to oversee their challenge while Shandong Luneng, Beijing Guoan, Shenhua, and now Jiangsu and Hebei are all trying to emulate Gunagzhou. But ▸

> "The time has come to start another stage of my career. I have talked with Atletico a lot and we realise this is best for both of us"
>
> **Jackson Martinez on his £32m move to Guangzhou Evergrande**

Challenge...Shandong Luneng's Diego Tardelli

Chinese takeover

The clubs and football businesses bought by Chinese finance

6 GESTIFUTE *(Portugal)*
Jorge Mendes (left) – agent to Cristiano Ronaldo and Jose Mourinho – was reported to have sold a stake in his Gestifute agency to Foyo Culture, a company controlled by Guo Guangchang, chairman of investment company Fosun.

LIGAPRO *(Portugal)*
Chinese LED light manufacturer Ledman agreed to sponsor Portugal's second tier but backed down from a demand that 10 Chinese players be included in the line-ups of the league's top 10 clubs. Ledman also agreed to send three assistant coaches to work with the clubs.

1 MANCHESTER CITY *(England)*
The cash-rich, state-backed China Media Capital (CMC) paid $400m (£265m) for a 13 per cent share in the City Football Group holding company that owns Manchester City on behalf of Sheikh Mansour's Abu Dhabi investment vehicle.

2 DEN HAAG *(Holland)*
Chinese businessman Wang Hui bought the Eredivisie club for a reported $8.9m in 2014 but has since run into problems over his financing of the club.

3 SLAVIA PRAGUE *(Czech Republic)*
Shanghai-based CEFC China Energy Company Limited acquired a 59 per cent stake in the Czech club in 2015. CEFC, China's sixth-largest private company, also bought a stake in the Czech airline Travel Services and the brewery Pivovary Lobkowicz.

4 SOCHAUX *(France)*
Tech Pro, a Hong Kong-listed electrical manufacturer, bought the French club, which was previously owned by Peugeot for 66 years, in 2015. Sochaux have since dropped into the Ligue 2 relegation zone.

5 INFRONT *(Switzerland)*
Wanda Group bought Swiss sports marketing company Infront Sports & Media for £889m. Infront's businesses include producing the World Cup TV broadcasts for FIFA through its subsidiary HBS. Its president and CEO is Philippe Blatter, nephew of Sepp.

CHINA

7 ESPANYOL *(Spain)*
Chen Yansheng (below), 46-year-old millionaire owner of toy-car makers Rastar, became the club's majority shareholder, paying €65m for a 56 per cent stake last November.

ATLETICO MADRID *(Spain)*
In January 2015, Chinese billionaire Wang Jianlin (above) bought a 20 per cent stake in the Spanish club for £34m. Wang heads the Wanda group, China's biggest property company, and was owner of Dalian Wanda, which became Dalian Shide.

Future...young talent in a training match at the Evergrande academy in Qingyuan

Chinese and Asian glory is no longer enough for Guangzhou, who now want to win the Club World Cup and become a global power. Whether it is possible remains to be seen, but the effects of the investment have already been clear in continental terms. Until Guangzhou, a Chinese team had not won the Asian title since 1990. With a bit more luck, the two Champions Leagues in the last three years could have been four from four. After years of Japanese and especially South Korean domination, Guangzhou are Asia's premier club.

These improvements come directly from transfer spending and the accumulation of much of the national team. For Chinese football to improve across the board the standard of the domestic players has to rise. This is more difficult. It has been argued the arrival of talented foreigners helps the locals and there have been signs of this. Better coaches make a difference too, hence the signing of experienced men like Scolari and Lippi. The likes of Eriksson, ex-Brazilian boss Mano Menezes, Alberto Zaccheroni and Dragan Stojkovic are an improvement on many of the domestic tacticians especially given the traditional lack of coaching education.

Better coaching of coaches is being addressed along with many other things. The Ministry of Education has been working for the past three years on rolling out a programme that will see 20,000 schools teach kids football at least once a week by next year. There are plans to expand that and reverse the countrywide trend that does not see youngsters playing the game. Throw in private academies like the one built by Guangzhou Evergrande and Real Madrid, reportedly the biggest in the world, and the hope is that the increase in money, brand and profile of Chinese football will encourage more kids to aim for professional careers, the lack of which in the past has been a major problem for the country.

Continuing to attract top foreign talent is also important. Whether the very best players in the world will choose China may depend on what happens to the growing number of Brazilian stars now in the country. At the moment, given the geographic practicalities and China's reputation, Brazilians put their national team place in doubt if they make the move but as more go, there could be a point when that changes.

If other stars see that China does not damage national team chances while offering big money, a vibrant league and a fascinating experience then genuine A-listers could be on their way. And that really could be a game changer. WS

> "Chinese football is progressing, but we need the experience of playing in competitions like the Club World Cup and the Asian Champions League."
>
> **Luiz Felipe Scolari**

Foreign coaches in Chinese Super League

Chang Woe-Ryong *(SKo)* Chongqing Lifan

Sven Goran Eriksson *(Swe)* Shanghai SIPG

Hong Myung-bo *(SKo)* Hangzhou Greentown

Gregorio Manzano *(Spa, above)* Shanghai Shenhua

Mano Menezes *(Bra)* Shandong Luneng

Dragan Okuka *(Ser)* Tianjin Teda

Park Tae-ha *(SKo)* Yanbian Fude

Dan Petrescu *(Rom)* Jiangsu Suning

Yasen Petrov *(Bul)* Shijiazhuang Ever Bright

Luis Felipe Scolari *(Bra)* Guangzhou Evergrande

Slavisa Stojanovic *(Sln)* Changchun Yatai

Dragan Stojkovic *(Ser)* Guangzhou R&F

Alberto Zaccheroni *(Ita)* Beijing Guoan

Move...ex-Brazil coach Mano Menezes has taken charge at Shandong Luneng

THE 500 MOST IMPORTANT PLAYERS ON THE PLANET

Heroes, villains & future stars

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Five hundred to debate and discuss...

How and why we selected the *World Soccer* 500 for 2016

Twelve months on from its first incarnation, the *World Soccer* 500 is back. It is not intended to be a list of the "best" 500 players in the world. It's impossible to compare players from different leagues and continents; any list is inevitably subjective. We have endeavoured to compile a list of the world's most talked-about players – the most newsworthy who, by definition, are the most important.

As with last year, we began by drawing up a list of the key players by league – starting with 50 each for the leading leagues in Europe (England, Germany, Spain), 40 for France and Italy, between 15 and 25 for middle-ranking leagues, and ending with between five and 10 for smaller leagues.

We tried to include players who fell into five different categories:

1 In-form players who have been making headlines in the 2015-16 season.
2 The young talents who have earned rave reviews in the past year.
3 The internationals who are key figures for their respective national sides.
4 The headline-makers who have made news for their actions off the pitch.
5 Those genuine world-class players who regularly feature in World XIs.

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK #WS500

Reaching the final list was not easy. There are many players who missed the final cut but who came very close. For example, Obafemi Martins, a regular scorer for Seattle Sounders in Major League Soccer, did not make the 500, following his late switch to China, but we did include Jackson Martinez, a flop at Atletico Madrid, because his move to China generated headlines around the world.

We have also tried to include at least three players from each of the teams at Euro 2016, the major footballing event of the year. So we included Jonathan Walters, scorer of the goals that took the Republic of Ireland to the finals but not Edin Dzeko, mostly on the bench for Roma and whose Bosnia side was beaten by the Republic in the play-offs. We also included players who are likely to feature in the Copa America and Rio Olympics.

● *Join the debate about the WS500 at worldsoccer.com and #WS500.*

Home boy...Carlos Tevez, back with Boca Juniors, takes on River Plate in Argentina's *Superclasico*

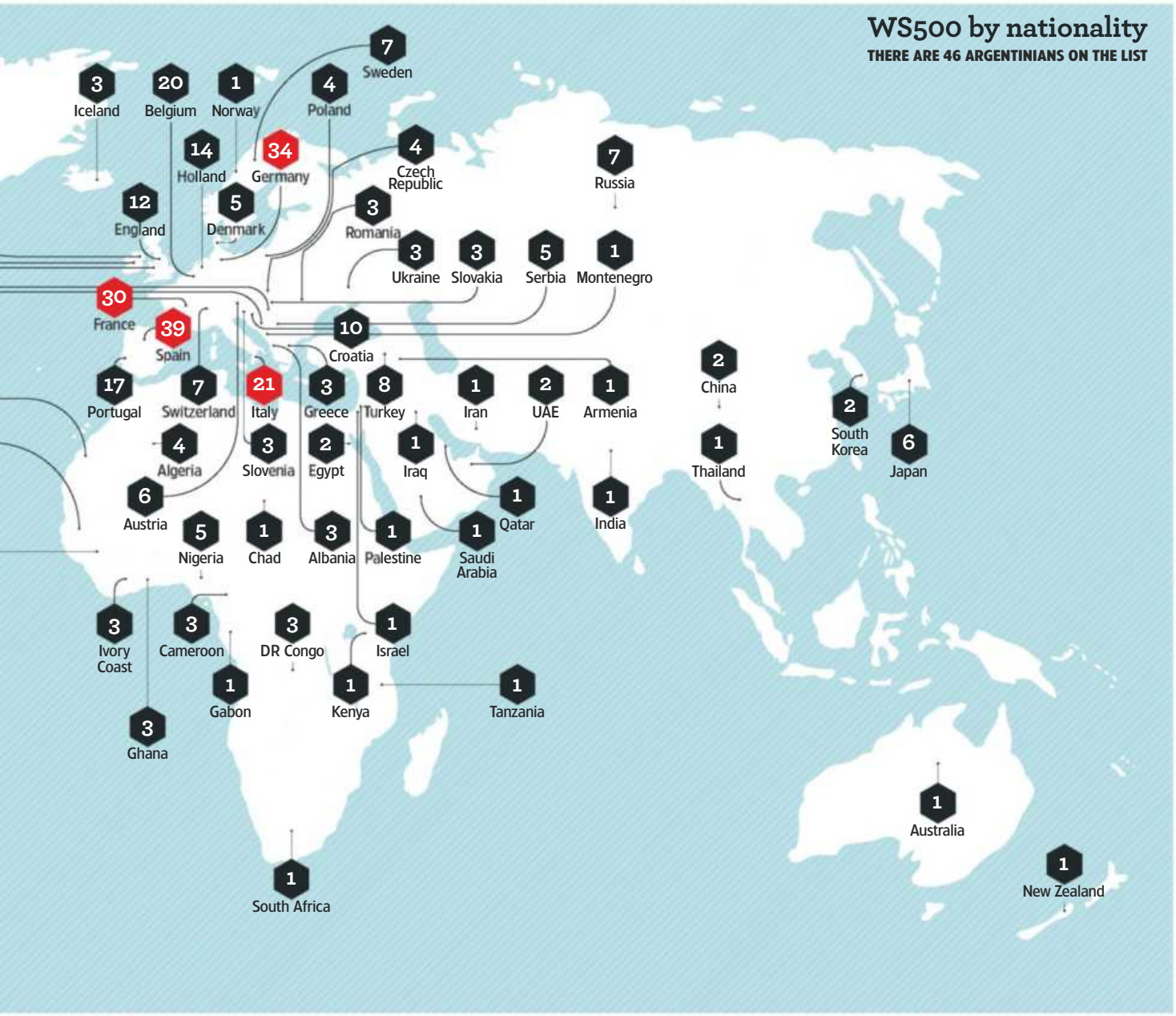
WS500 by club

BARCELONA HAVE THE MOST PLAYERS

A)	Barcelona	15
B)	Bayern Munich	13
C)	Juventus	13
D)	Paris Saint-Germain	13
E)	Real Madrid	13
F)	Atletico Madrid	12
G)	Manchester City	11
H)	Arsenal	10
I)	Chelsea	9
J)	Borussia Dortmund	8
K)	Napoli	8
L)	Roma	8
M)	Bayer Leverkusen	7
N)	Porto	7
O)	Tottenham Hotspur	7
P)	Sporting Lisbon	6
Q)	Manchester United	5
R)	Monaco	5
S)	Wolfsburg	5

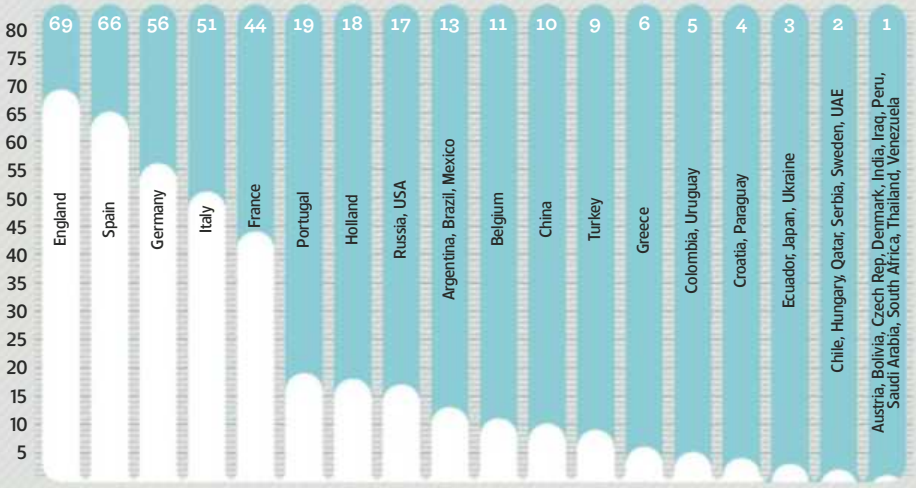
WS500 by nationality

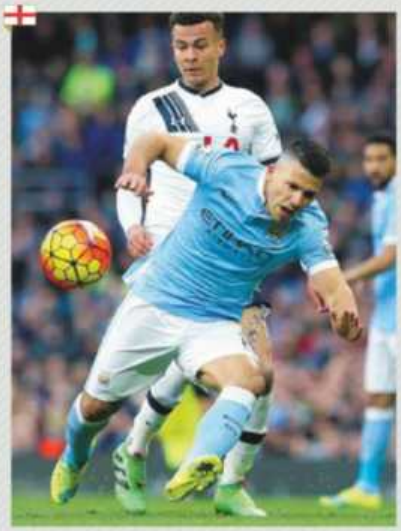
THERE ARE 46 ARGENTINIANS ON THE LIST



WS500 by league

ENGLAND'S PREMIER LEAGUE LEADS THE WAY WITH 69 PLAYERS, FOLLOWED BY SPAIN'S LIGA





Impact players...Sergio Aguero (blue) and Dele Alli

Aritz ADURIZ

Age 35, Athletic Bilbao & Spain

"Age is just a number," says the Athletic Bilbao front man. And when it comes to him, the numbers get better with age.

He has 25 goals in his first 34 games this season which, added to the 26 in 47 games that he amassed last season, would be impressive enough anyway. However, it is even more striking when you consider that he recently celebrated his 35th birthday.

Last summer Aduriz renewed his contract at San Mames – not out of some sense of loyalty to the club, but because the team needs him – and that means he will almost certainly now end his career where he started it.

His is a curious case as he admits he was not much of a football fan as a kid; or at least that he was not raised on the game as his parents were more into skiing, mountaineering and trekking. At the age of nine he was runner-up in the national cross-country skiing championships.

Then there's the fact that he is from San Sebastian, which is home to Athletic's great rivals, Real Sociedad.

Aduriz began his career at Second Division B club Aurrera Vitoria before joining Bilbao Athletic, the club's second team, a season later aged 19. But this is not the tale of a one-club man, even if he would have liked it to be. Twice he departed, a sense of disappointment accompanying him as he reluctantly did so, and twice he returned.

Following spells at Burgos, Valladolid, Mallorca and Valencia, Aduriz is back again and better than ever before. He was always good – once described by Xavi as the "best header of a ball I have ever seen", but he was never this good.

Up to the age of 31, he averaged 0.29 goals a game but since his 31st birthday, he has averaged 0.54.

"There is no secret," he says. "I like training every morning. I enjoy it." He looks after himself and has come to appreciate his career perhaps

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK #WS500

more than ever before. Others have come to appreciate him too. He has just one cap for Spain and most now agree that he should get a call-up for the European Championship in France, not least because he offers something different to all the other options and, apart from Luis Suarez, no striker in Spain has scored more goals this season in all competitions.

While national coach Vicente Del Bosque has much to ponder, Aduriz's team-mates have no doubts. At the end of last season's Spanish Cup semi-final, it was suggested to midfielder Mikel Rico that someone might have to build a statue in honour of Aduriz, who had just taken them to the Final. "Give me the spatula and I'll build it myself," he replied.

Sid Lowe

Aymen ABDENNOUR

Age 26, Valencia (Spa) & Tunisia

New Entry Defender who replaced Nicolas Otamendi last summer amid claims that agent Jorge Mendes had arranged all the deals.

Omar ABDULRAHMAN

Age 24, Al Ain & UAE

One of the great hopes of Asian football. The playmaker signed a new four-year deal last year and will move to Europe at some stage.

Vincent ABOUBAKAR

Age 24, Porto (Por) & Cameroon

Powerful striker who has not flourished as hoped at Porto this season in place of Jackson Martinez, but the potential is there.

Sebastian ABREU

Age 39, Sol de America (Par) & Uruguay

New Entry Big, charismatic centre forward, known as "*El Loco*", now with his 21st club in his ninth different country.

ADRIEN SILVA

Age 26, Sporting Lisbon & Portugal

New Entry Central midfielder who has played a key role in Sporting's 2016 title challenge. Rejected Chelsea as a teenager.

Sergio AGUERO

Age 27, Manchester City (Eng) & Argentina

One of the world's leading strikers holds the key to City's chances of silverware this season. If he stays fit, they will score goals and stay in contention.

David ALABA

Age 23, Bayern Munich (Ger) & Austria

More than just Bayern's left-back, he is a key, goalscoring midfielder for Austria and their Footballer of the Year for the past five seasons.

Jordi ALBA

Age 26, Barcelona & Spain

Attacking left-back for club and country. Consistently brilliant for Barca since joining from Valencia. Scored Spain's second goal in the Euro 2012 Final.

Paco ALCACER

Age 22, Valencia & Spain

Striker who has played his way into Spain's starting line-up with five goals in the Euro 2016 qualifiers. Named Valencia captain by Gary Neville.

Toby ALDERWEIRELD

Age 26, Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) & Belgium

New Entry Impressive in central defence for Spurs since joining last summer. Plays right-back for Belgium.

ALEX TEIXEIRA

Age 26, Jiangsu Suning (Chn) & Brazil

Versatile goalscorer who left Shakhtar Donetsk for China in February 2016 for an Asian record transfer fee of €50m.

ALISSON

Age 23, Internacional & Brazil

New Entry A rising star, displacing his brother Muriel at club level, now first choice for his country.

ANDRE ANDRE

Age 26, Porto & Portugal

Goalscoring midfielder who left Guimaraes in the summer and has impressed since his move to Porto.

Marko ARNAUTOVIC

Age 26, Stoke City (Eng) & Austria

New Entry Has hit the ground running at Stoke. Will be a key figure at the Euros.

Takuma ASANO

Age 21, Sanfrecce Hiroshima & Japan

New Entry Striker whose goals helped Japan claim the Asian Under-23 title and qualify for the Rio 2016 Olympics.

PROFILED **Dele ALLI** ON PAGE 37

PROFILED **ARDA Turan** ON PAGE 38

Pierre-Emerick AUBAMEYANG

Age 26, Borussia Dortmund (Ger) & Gabon

Reigning African Footballer of the Year, in prolific scoring form for Dortmund. Insists he is happy in Germany.

Serge AURIER

Age 23, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Ivory Coast

Attacking right-back, suspended indefinitely by PSG in February after criticising coach Laurent Blanc in an online video.

Andre AYEW

Age 26, Swansea City (Eng) & Ghana

One of Africa's leading forwards, he joined Swansea on a free transfer last summer. Son of former Ghana great Abedi Pele.

Sardar AZMOUN

Age 21, Rostov (Rus, on loan from Rubin Kazan, Rus) & Iran

Iran's brightest prospect continues to impress in Russia and has become a regular in his national team over the past year.

Carlos BACCA

Age 29, Milan (Ita) & Colombia

Late bloomer who sold fish and was a bus conductor before Colombian top-flight debut aged 23. Goals for Sevilla earned move to Milan last summer.

Eric BAILLY

Age 21, Villarreal (Spa) & Ivory Coast

New Entry Promising young centre-back who made his international debut when Ivory Coast won the 2015 Nations Cup.

Cedric BAKAMBU

Age 24, Villarreal (Spa) & DR Congo

New Entry Former French youth international who is impressing in his first season in La Liga after a spell in Turkey.

Gareth BALE

Age 26, Real Madrid (Spa) & Wales

The world's most expensive footballer, his goals and leadership propelled Wales to their first finals since 1958.

Ever BANEGA

Age 27, Sevilla (Spa) & Argentina

New Entry Midfielder who put a controversial past behind him to play an integral part in Sevilla's Europa League success last season.

Ross BARKLEY

Age 22, Everton & England

One of the great hopes of English football and a contender to start at Euro 2016. Has added spectacular goals to his game in 2016 but may have outgrown Everton.

Abdel BARRADA

Age 26, Marseille (Fra) & Morocco

New Entry The French-born Moroccan international has excelled under Spanish coach Michel at Marseille this season.

Diego BARRETO

Age 34, Olimpia & Paraguay

New Entry Olympic silver medallist (2004) who won league titles with two different clubs last season; first with Cerro Porteno, then moved to rivals Olimpia.

Wilmar BARRIOS

Age 22, Tolima & Colombia

New Entry Little central midfielder with pace, bite in the tackle and the ability to use the ball. On the fringes of the national team squad.

Augusto BATALLA

Age 19, River Plate & Argentina

Highly-rated under-20 keeper who turned down a move to Real Madrid last summer. Set to play at the Olympics.

Claudio BEAUVUE

Age 27, Celta Vigo (Spa) & France

Ex-Guingamp striker who moved to Celta in January after a frustrating six months at Lyon.

Karim BELLARABI

Age 25, Bayer Leverkusen & Germany

Speedy winger who scored the Bundesliga's fastest goal (nine seconds) last year and is now a German national team regular.

PROFILED
MICHY BATSHUAYI
ON PAGE 40

Dele ALLI

Age 19, Tottenham Hotspur & England

New Entry Ten months ago, Dele Alli was playing in the third tier of English football for his local club MK Dons as they won promotion to the English Championship. He had been signed by Tottenham on the last day of the January 2015 transfer window but was loaned back to the League One side for the remainder of the season.

Less than a year later, he is the talk of English football, fast-tracked into the senior national side and hailed as the scorer of a contender for Goal of the Season.

In January, England manager Roy Hodgson was among those who saw Alli line up in Spurs' midfield against Crystal Palace at Selhurst Park. Receiving the ball on the edge of the penalty area, he flicked the ball over his own head, leaving Palace captain Mile Jedinak thrashing at thin air, caught the ball on the volley and aimed a well-directed shot past Palace goalkeeper Wayne Hennessey.

Alli demonstrated poise, technique and audacity in a single movement that has probably changed his career for good.

"That's proper talent," said Matt Le Tissier, scorer of some spectacular goals himself. "It's not something that you practise on the training ground. It's something that happens very instinctively."

Le Tissier, who watched the game as a studio pundit for Sky, added: "It was pretty special. It's not very often a goal gets a massive round of applause from all the pundits.

"When we all saw it, it was a spontaneous 'Oh my goodness'. It was brilliant skill and the fact he has the confidence to even try that is fantastic."

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After making his debut for MK Dons as a 16-year-old in 2012, Alli quickly appeared on the radar of Premier League scouts. Liverpool had the opportunity to sign him in January 2015 but the player rejected their offer of £4,000 a week. Tottenham, where manager Mauricio Pochettino has not been afraid to blood young English players, stepped in with a better offer.

But the rush to praise Alli must be tempered by a recognition that there is also a physical side to his game that needs to be carefully channelled.

Earlier in the game against Palace, he kicked out at French midfielder Yohan Cabaye in an off-the-ball incident that, had it been witnessed by officials, would have seen him sent off and the wonder goal would never have happened.

A few weeks later, Alli was booked – and should have been sent off – for a sly but clearly deliberate kick at Nenad Tomovic as the Fiorentina defender lay on the ground in a Europa League tie.

Alli's supporters were quick to point out that many of the finest players have channelled their aggression to good use – not least David Beckham, whose career hardly suffered following his red card at the 1998 World Cup.

For the moment, though, Dele Alli is enjoying a honeymoon period as the bright young thing of English football.

John Holmesdale

Lars BENDER

Age 26, Bayer Leverkusen & Germany

Hit by injury this term but the Leverkusen captain is still a clever operator.

PROFILED HATEM BEN ARFA ON PAGE 42

Dario BENEDETTO

Age 25, America & Mexico

Born in Argentina but now a naturalised Mexican after some strong performances in the Liga MX and the CONCACAF Champions League.

Martin BENITEZ

Age 21, Independiente & Argentina

New Entry Impressive form in a deeper attacking role prompted his coach Mauricio Pellegrino to compare him to Sergio Aguero.

Karim BENZEMA

Age 28, Real Madrid (Spa) & France

Still prolific for his club but his place at Euro 2016 is in doubt because of his involvement in a blackmail case.

Domenico BERARDI

Age 21, Sassuolo & Italy

One of Italian football's brightest prospects. Juventus sold their stake last summer though they retain the right to re-sign him.

BERNARDO SILVA

Age 21, Monaco (Fra) & Portugal

Versatile creator, usually on the right flank. Slipped through Benfica's net as a kid but was picked up by Monaco. Now a key figure for Portugal.

Lucas BIGLIA

Age 30, Lazio (Ita) & Argentina

Lazio's captain is an experienced enforcer and was a starter for Argentina at last year's Copa America. Regularly linked with a move to England.

Birkir BJARNASON

Age 27, Basle (Swi) & Iceland

New Entry An influential figure in Iceland's qualification for Euro 2016, "Thor" can play on either flank or centrally.

Jerome BOATENG

Age 27, Bayern Munich & Germany

Now recognised as a hugely important figure for club and country, but a groin injury has put his Euro 2016 place in doubt.

Daniel BODE

Age 29, Ferencvaros & Hungary

New Entry One of the heroes of Hungary's Euro qualifying play-off victory over Norway. Tall striker who has played his whole career in the Hungarian league.

Miler BOLANOS

Age 25, Gremio (Bra) & Ecuador

Strong, versatile, quick and skilful support striker. The outstanding player in Ecuador for the past two years, he joined Gremio in February 2016.

Yannick BOLASIE

Age 26, Crystal Palace (Eng) & DR Congo

Speedy wideman with a showreel of unpredictable tricks. Used in a more central attacking role by DR Congo.

Giacomo BONAVENTURA

Age 26, Milan & Italy

Now firmly established at Milan, his industry and flexibility has seen him recognised as an influential figure under coach Sinisa Mihajlovic.

Leonardo BONUCCI

Age 28, Juventus & Italy

New Entry One of Serie A's best defenders, his partnership with Giorgio Chiellini has been key to the revival of Juventus in 2016.

Alberto BOTIA

Age 27, Olympiakos (Gre) & Spain

Former Barcelona trainee and Spain under-23 cap who has been troubled by injury since moving to Greece in summer 2014.

Gustavo BOU

Age 26, Racing & Argentina

Released by River Plate as a youngster, he made it the hard way, loaned to lower leagues. Was top scorer when Racing won the 2015 title.

ARDA Turan

Age 29, Barcelona (Spa) & Turkey

Not long after he arrived at Barcelona, Arda Turan was asked if he knew whether his new team-mates had started to take the mickey out of him yet. "No," he replied, laughing. "They're too scared that I'll throw a boot at them."

He had done it to a linesman before – against Barcelona, in fact – but it says something about the Turk's character that it became something to laugh about more than lament. When he celebrated his birthday that year, friends gave him a cake decorated with a boot on top.

Arda is different, alright. There's something about him that fascinates, and the fact that he

still does not speak Spanish – or does not admit to speaking Spanish – only increases that sense of mystique.

From the gloriously bushy beard to shaving his hair when Atletico Madrid won the Spanish Cup because a promise is a promise, from buying his dad a petrol station to paying the electricity bill for the entire block of flats where he used to live in Istanbul, fans find it hard not to fall for him.

Just ask the biographer who called him "a hipster's Jesus Christ" or the Atletico-supporting reporter who likened him to Lou Reed.

"He's different, special...you have to understand him the way he is," wrote Picu Diaz in *AS*.

Which is what Atletico supporters did until he left. Then they could not understand it; they understood still less the way it happened. For once, they accused him of not managing the situation well.

It was what he wanted, though. So much so that despite having to wait six months to actually play for Barca, because of the club's transfer ban, he insisted it was worth it, saying: "I'd wait longer if I had to."

His idol is Andres Iniesta, even though they're not so far away in age, and says that he always felt a bit bad when he kicked the Spain playmaker during his Atletico days. But then, he added, that's what he had to do.

What he has to do now is much more his style. He says he found the physical demands made of him by Diego Simeone hard to take, even though his coach liked him precisely because he was not the same as all the rest; because he had that moment's pause, the calm and cleverness that others lacked.

All of which is not to say that he won't have to run at Barcelona. But it will be more about the ball there.

At the Camp Nou, it will be his role to fill in for any of the front three and to provide a more technical alternative in midfield should Luis Enrique want to vary the approach.

Arda once claimed he would rather give a pass than score a goal. Once a Galatasaray ballboy who was obsessed with Gheorghe Hagi, he claims: "My football is the football of the streets of Istanbul". Now he plays it in Barcelona.

Sid Lowe

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Michy BATSHUAYI

Age 22, Marseille (Fra) & Belgium

New Entry Born in Brussels, he was snapped up by Anderlecht at just 13, but his career was almost torpedoed before it had begun when the Belgian outfit cut ties with the youngster because of his bad attitude.

Luckily, a growing maturity, not to mention his extraordinary talent, saw him offered a second chance by Standard Liege in 2008 – and he hasn't looked back since.

After making his debut in February 2011, a haul of 44 goals in 120 games had a number of top European sides sniffing around before Marseille signed him on a five-year deal for €7 million in June 2014. Since arriving in France, he has quickly established himself as a fan favourite thanks to his lightning-quick feet and ultra-cool temperament in front of goal.

Twenty-five goals in his first 60 appearances suggests a player who doesn't lose his head when the net looms large and the tackles are flying in. But as he himself says: "It doesn't make much difference if I score 20 goals in a season if the team doesn't get the right results and we end up in mid-table. If we lose and I score, well I'm not happy. I'm a really bad loser."

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK
#WS500

Despite the abundance of footballing talent in Belgium at present, Batshuayi has been quick to make his mark on the international stage, notching an impressive seven goals in just 13 games for the under-21 side. Aware of his dual nationality, DR Congo coach Florent Ibenge made overtures to the player – all to no avail. Batshuayi threw his hat in with Belgium and was rewarded with a first senior call-up for the European Championship qualifier against Cyprus in March of 2015.

In what can only be called a fairy-tale debut, he scored with his very first touch of the ball in senior international football as Belgium won 5-0, and followed that up with another goal, against Italy, in his next appearance.

Nobody is suggesting that he is the finished article just yet. His first touch can sometimes let him down and he sometimes plays too much as an individual, which is why he wasn't picked for Belgium's World Cup squad in Brazil in 2014. But there is no denying his raw talent and his goals record speaks for itself.

Rumours abounded that a host of English clubs – including Tottenham Hotspur, Crystal Palace and Newcastle United – were after him in the January transfer window, but Batshuayi signed a contract extension with Marseille that tied him to the club until 2020.

While that won't deter clubs from coming after him this summer, at least Marseille will be able to bag a much bigger fee.

Howard Johnson

Sofiane BOUFAL

Age 22, Lille & France

New Entry Lively wide man who has starred for Lille since joining from Angers in 2015. Reportedly scouted by PSG and a number of English clubs.

Michael BRADLEY

Age 28, Toronto & USA

A similar story to Clint Dempsey: he moved back to MLS from Roma in 2014 on a huge salary ($6.5m) but has yet to win anything with Toronto.

Robbie BRADY

Age 24, Norwich City (Eng) & Republic of Ireland

New Entry Former Manchester United trainee who played an important role in Ireland's qualification for Euro 2016.

Yacine BRAHIMI

Age 26, Porto (Por) & Algeria

Brilliant dribbler with an eye for goal. Tipped to be Porto's next big sale but the club are keen to earn as close as possible to his buyout clause (€60m).

Martin BRAITHWAITE

Age 24, Toulouse (Fra) & Denmark

New Entry Born in Denmark to a Guyanese father and now scoring regularly for Toulouse in Ligue 1.

Claudio BRAVO

Age 32, Barcelona (Spa) & Chile

New Entry Captain of Chile's 2015 Copa America-winning side and first choice for Barcelona in Liga matches.

BRUNO Soriano

Age 31, Villarreal & Spain

New Entry Long-serving captain of his boyhood club. Stayed with Villarreal after relegation in 2013 and now challenging for the Champions League.

Constantin BUDESCU

Age 26, Dalian Yifang (Chn) & Romania

New Entry Romanian league's best player in 2015. Recently moved to the Chinese second division.

Gianluigi BUFFON

Age 38, Juventus & Italy

Juve captain and Italy's record cap holder (154 and counting). Says he will probably retire after competing in a record sixth World Cup in 2018.

BURAK Yilmaz

Age 30, Galatasaray & Turkey

A prolific scorer for Galatasaray and the national side. Began his career as a midfielder and often linked with a transfer abroad (most recently West Ham).

Sergio BUSQUETS

Age 27, Barcelona & Spain

Vital central lynchpin of Barcelona's midfield. A quiet enabler who is highly valued by his team-mates. Son of former Barca keeper Carles Busquets.

Yohan CABAYE

Age 30, Crystal Palace (Eng) & France

New Entry Rebuilding his career after a spell on the sidelines at PSG. Plays in a deeper role for Palace than for the French national team.

Tim CAHILL

Age 36, unattached & Australia

Australia's all-time top scorer is without a club after leaving Chinese side Shanghai Shenhua in February, just three months after joining them.

CAIO

Age 29, Grasshoppers (Swi) & Brazil

New Entry Attacking midfielder who has found his scoring feet in Switzerland after four seasons in Germany at Eintracht.

Hakan CALHANOGLU

Age 22, Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) & Turkey

Exciting German-born free-kick specialist tipped to star for Turkey at Euro 2016. Linked with top clubs.

Hatem BEN ARFA

Age 28, Nice & France

New Entry Born in the suburbs of Paris, Ben Arfa has long been recognised as one of France's most naturally gifted footballers. Back in 1999, aged 13, he was already known as one of the most precocious talents featured in a TV documentary that followed 24 hopefuls selected from 800 candidates to join the French Football Federation's elite youth programme.

Yet this may surprise English football fans, who most likely only remember his unsuccessful stints with Newcastle United and on loan at Hull City, where he failed to rip up any trees and fell out with managers and fans alike.

However, since returning to France with Nice in August 2015, things have been on the up and up for the 15-times capped international in a season that has seen the attacking midfielder produce some extraordinary performances.

Of course, Ben Arfa being Ben Arfa, it hasn't all been plain sailing since he arrived back in his native country.

Having signed for Nice in January 2015 after Newcastle ripped up his contract, the former Lyon and Marseille man was left in limbo for six months when FIFA confirmed that the rules do not allow for a player to appear for three clubs in the same season, Ben Arfa having already turned out for Newcastle and Hull.

After initially threatening to quit the game entirely, he finally made his debut for Nice in a 2-1 defeat at home to Monaco at the start of this season. A week later he was off the mark goals-wise, scoring a penalty in a 3-3 draw with Troyes and since then has been the key driver as Nice fight for one of the top four spots in Ligue 1.

"I felt like I was locked in a dark room with no door," he says of his time in England. "When I signed for Nice, I felt like I was getting out of hell."

Much of the credit for his renaissance must go to Nice coach Claude Puel, who has opted to focus on what the player does well – giving defenders twisted blood – rather than the fact that he often comes across as a guy who can start an argument in an empty room.

"A lot of the good things that are happening to me right now are directly down to Puel," says Ben Arfa. "He doesn't try to turn me into something I'm not. He doesn't go on and on about my weaknesses, but tries to improve my strengths."

Such has been Ben Arfa's form that France coach Didier Deschamps brought him back in from the cold after more than three years out of the international arena and picked him for the games against Germany and England in November last year.

Ben Arfa's talent has never been in doubt, but could his head at last be screwed on properly? With the Euros taking place in France this summer, it would be a mighty fine time for him, finally, to grow up.

Howard Johnson

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Jose CALLEJON

Age 29, Napoli (Ita) & Spain

Thriving in Italy after a 2013 move from Real Madrid, where opportunities were limited. Playing in a number of roles for title-chasing Napoli.

Ignacio CAMACHO

Age 25, Malaga & Spain

Young defensive midfielder who has been troubled by injuries over the past year. On the fringes of the Spain squad and linked with bigger clubs.

Esteban CAMBIASSO

Age 35, Olympiakos (Gre) & Argentina

New Entry Veteran extending his career in Greece after a productive season in England with Leicester.

Emre CAN

Age 22, Liverpool (Eng) & Germany

Powerful box-to-box operator who can play in a number of positions but has yet to establish himself in one specific role.

Lorik CANA

Age 32, Nantes (Fra) & Albania

New Entry Kosovo-born captain of the Albania side that will compete at Euro 2016. Has played in the top divisions of France, Italy, England and Turkey.

Antonio CANDREVA

Age 28, Lazio & Italy

Right-sided wide man who has been a key attacking outlet for club and country. Valued at £25m by Lazio to deter suitors.

Facundo CARDOZO

Age 20, Bolivar (Bol, loan from Velez Sarsfield) & Argentina

New Entry Under-20 defender who is set to play at the 2016 Rio Olympics. Currently on loan in Bolivia after a fallout with Velez.

Edinson CAVANI

Age 28, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Uruguay

"*El Matador*" appeared to have patched things up with Laurent Blanc but has been dropped to the PSG bench since the start of 2016.

Juan CAZARES

Age 23, Atletico Mineiro (Bra) & Ecuador

New Entry Little playmaker, clever and speedy. Used as a late substitute by the national team to punish tired defences.

Santi CAZORLA

Age 31, Arsenal (Eng) & Spain

His 2015-16 season has been disrupted by a knee injury but, when fit, his deep-lying playmaking skills have been important for both club and country.

Petr CECH

Age 33, Arsenal (Eng) & Czech Rep

New Entry Thriving at Arsenal since being allowed to leave Chelsea by owner Roman Abramovich. Czech Republic captain.

Jose CEVALLOS

Age 21, LDU Quito & Ecuador

New Entry Elegant but languid playmaker. Son of Juan Francisco, former national team keeper and current president of Barcelona (Guayaquil).

Charyl CHAPPUIS

Age 24, Suphanburi & Thailand

New Entry Born in Switzerland and played in the 2009 Under-17 world title win. Now, through his Thai mother, he is helping Thailand improve in the rankings.

Sunil CHHETRI

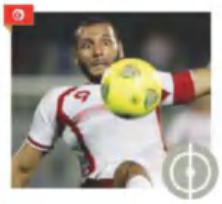
Age 31, Bengaluru (loan from Mumbai City) & India

India's captain and all-time top scorer. First Indian to score a hat-trick in the fledgling ISL; also contracted to play in the I-League.

Giorgio CHIELLINI

Age 31, Juventus & Italy

Centre-back or left-back who remains the unquestionable power behind the Juventus defence. The "victim" of Luis Suarez's bite at the World Cup.



Yassine CHIKHAOUI

Age 29, Al Gharafa (Qat) & Tunisia

New Entry Tunisia's captain may have left Europe for Qatar but he remains a key figure for his country.

Vlad CHIRICHES

Age 26, Napoli (Ita) & Romania

New Entry Centre-back who has yet to convince at Napoli following a move from Tottenham but is still an important figure for Romania's national side.

Alejandro CHUMACERO

Age 24, The Strongest & Bolivia

New Entry Nicknamed "Chuma-steiger" for a supposed likeness to Bastian Schweinsteiger, he is a dynamic figure for club and country.

Jasper CILLESSEN

Age 26, Ajax & Holland

A level-headed keeper regarded as the best in the Dutch league. First choice for club and country. Contracted until 2018 but often linked with a move abroad.

Viktor CLAESSON

Age 24, Elfsborg & Sweden

New Entry Left-sided set-piece specialist who has been one of the strongest performers in the Swedish league over the past few seasons.

German CONTI

Age 21, Colon & Argentina

New Entry Tall centre-back who top clubs in Argentina are chasing to sign. Likely to be part of Argentina's squad for the 2016 Rio Olympics.

Ante CORIC

Age 18, Dinamo Zagreb & Croatia

Hailed as Croatia's next big star. Yet to be capped at senior level but has already denied deals to join Milan, Real Madrid and Chelsea.

Angel CORREA

Age 20, Atletico Madrid (Spa) & Argentina

Former under-20 star whose arrival at Atletico was delayed by a heart problem. Scored on his senior Argentina debut in 2015.

Diego COSTA

Age 27, Chelsea (Eng) & Spain

Boisterous, unruly but highly effective. His loss of form mirrored Jose Mourinho's demise at Chelsea. Brazil-born but will play for Spain at Euro 2016.

Benoit COSTIL

Age 28, Rennes & France

New Entry Former Under-21 keeper whose form for Rennes resulted in a call-up to the senior France squad. Linked with a move to Marseille.

Thibaut COURTOIS

Age 23, Chelsea (Eng) & Belgium

Probably the most successful product of Chelsea's multiple loan system, having spent three years at Atletico Madrid. From a family of volleyball players.

Philippe COUTINHO

Age 23, Liverpool (Eng) & Brazil

Back in the Brazil squad after a resurgence at Liverpool but finding it hard to win a starting berth alongside Neymar.

Adrian CUBAS

Age 19, Boca Juniors & Argentina

New Entry Has caught the eye as a defensive midfielder for Boca and made it to Argentina's under-20 side. Set to feature at the 2016 Olympics.

Moanes DABOUR

Age 23, Grasshoppers (Swi) & Israel

A prolific scorer in the Swiss league and a leading figure among Arab-Israeli footballers, having debuted for Israel in 2014.

Mahmoud DAHOUD

Age 20, Borussia M'gladbach & Germany

New Entry Born in Syria but capped by Germany under-19s. Has broken through at Gladbach this season.

Jurgen DAMM

Age 23, Tigres & Mexico

Speedy wide man who was tipped to move to Europe last summer but instead joined Tigres and won the Mexican title in the autumn.

DANI ALVES

Age 32, Barcelona (Spa) & Brazil

Nominally a right-back but far more effective going forward. Agreed a new contract until 2017 after signs of tension with the club last season.

Kingsley COMAN

Age 19, Bayern Munich (Ger, loan from Juventus, Ita) & France

It speaks volumes for the outrageous ability of the teenager that he has already worn the colours of three of Europe's biggest clubs: his Paris Saint-Germain alma mater; Juventus, where he featured last season, and now Bayern Munich.

A true speed merchant – so much so that he recently was clocked as the fastest player in the Bundesliga at 21.78mph – the young Parisian has been making a mad dash for stardom for as long as he can remember. Having invariably been used by PSG in higher youth age-groups, in February 2013 he became the capital club's youngest-ever first-teamer at the age of 16 years, eight months and four days.

The trouble for PSG was that the youngster was also in a prodigious hurry to move his career along. After just two Ligue 1 substitute appearances during the 2013-14 campaign, he decided enough was enough and refused to turn pro with the club, instead signing a lucrative five-year deal with Juventus. And what's more, he did not cost a penny.

Although dubbed "a potential phenomenon" by Juve coach Massimiliano Allegri early last term, Coman generally found the Italian game too tough a nut to crack and was often criticised for his lack of tactical understanding and defensive work-rate.

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Despite the considerable amount of time and effort the Italian club's management expended on courting him, he started on a handful of occasions in Serie A. And with Bayern pressing hard to enrol him, Juventus simply could not resist the chance to make what they thought to be a killing, agreeing a €7million fee for a two-season loan deal, with a €21m option to buy.

Unlike Juve, the German champions – and in particular coach Pep Guardiola – genuinely intended to play him as much as possible. And that is exactly what they have done, regularly using him as an alternative to the oft-injured Franck Ribery and Arjen Robben.

His speed, spontaneity and assertiveness are tailor-made for the wide open spaces of the Bundesliga – and equally important to Guardiola, he has adapted remarkably quickly to the many and varied demands of the Bayern collective.

"I'm the type of player who can make a difference at any moment in a game," declared a thoroughly unabashed Coman on his arrival at Bayern in September. No idle boast, obviously.

Nick Bidwell

Vladimir DARIDA

Age 25, Hertha Berlin (Ger) & Czech Rep

New Entry Hertha Berlin general manager Michael Preetz never tires of calling his side's Czech central midfielder "the heart and lungs of our team". And who would dare argue?

The driving force behind Hertha's surprisingly persistent assault on a Champions League qualifying spot, he has been nothing less than engine-room gold this season, his boundless energy, ball-winning bite, strong running and never-sated desire filling up the Berliner tank week in and week out.

No other player in the Bundesliga has covered more ground than him during this campaign, averaging over 13km per game, and when it comes to diligence and die-hard spirit, he is in a league of his own.

"I'm often asked why I run so much and I honestly don't really know myself," says Darida, who only last spring was relegated from the Bundesliga with his previous club, Freiburg.

"I've always had a thing about being a step quicker than the opposition.

"It's a gift I probably had in the cradle. I was born with these legs. In my position you have to get around the pitch. Backwards and forwards. Left and right."

Nor is he just a gritty and industrious marathon man. He is intelligent, technically sound, can pick out a pass and generally does an excellent job of linking defence and attack. Work ethic juxtaposed with strategic good sense.

"Darida's qualities were precisely what we needed in the heart of our midfield," explains Preetz.

"We had to fight long and hard to bring him in from Freiburg last summer. But it was worth it.

"One of our main weaknesses in recent times was the lack of a good quality number six/eight

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and Vladimir has filled that vacuum superbly. He's a full international and plays with that class. He's made an immediate impact here."

Preetz certainly earned his corn with the Darida deal, not only jumping the queue ahead of several other interested parties – including Anderlecht, Stuttgart, Werder Bremen and a few English sides – but also securing his services relatively cheaply, successfully knocking €1.2million off the original €5m asking price.

Twice a Czech league winner with Viktoria Plzen – in 2010-11 and 2012-13 – Darida has to religiously stick to a non-gluten diet and, by the look of him, he is equally intolerant of underachievement.

Nick Bidwell

DANILO Pereira

Age 24, Porto & Portugal

Defensive midfielder who has excelled since joining from Maritimo in 2015, keeping bigger names out of the side. On Benfica's books as a teenager.

DAVID LUIZ

Age 28, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Brazil

World's most expensive defender following his £50m move from Chelsea to PSG in summer 2014. Still first choice for Brazil.

Steven DAVIS

Age 31, Southampton (Eng) & Northern Ireland

New Entry Captain of the Northern Ireland side that reached Euro 2016 and scorer of crucial goals in the qualifying campaign.

Kevin DE BRUYNE

Age 24, Manchester City (Eng) & Belgium

City's record signing at £54m has flourished since joining from Wolfsburg last year, 18 months after being sold by Chelsea for £18m.

David DE GEA

Age 25, Manchester United (Eng) & Spain

One of the world's top goalkeepers. He quadrupled his wages when agreeing a new four-year contract with United last autumn.

Luuk DE JONG

Age 25, PSV & Holland

New Entry Rebuilding his career back in Holland after failing at Borussia Monchengladbach and Newcastle. A title winner last term with PSV.

Daniele DE ROSSI

Age 32, Roma & Italy

The Italy international has stayed loyal to Roma, helped by Serie A's highest salary of €6.5m per season, despite plenty of interest from England.

Brecht DEJAEGERE

Age 24, Gent & Belgium

New Entry A key figure in Gent's recent success. Rejected as a teenage goalkeeper by Club Brugge for being too small.

Nicolas DELGADILLO

Age 18, Velez Sarsfield & Argentina

New Entry Youngster who made headlines in Argentina and Spain after being spotted by agent Jorge Mendes.

Matias DELGADO

Age 33, Basle (Swi) & Argentina

New Entry Basle captain and veteran who is playing some of the best football of his career in his second spell with the Swiss champions.

Andy DELORT

Age 24, Caen & France

New Entry The former beach soccer player has excelled at Caen this season, rebuilding his career after an ill-fated move to Wigan in 2014.

Clint DEMPSEY

Age 32, Seattle Sounders & USA

The highest paid player in MLS ($6.7m a year) moved back to the USA in 2014 to boost Seattle's title-winning aims – so far unsuccessfully.

Leander DENDONCKER

Age 20, Anderlecht & Belgium

New Entry Powerful defensive holder who has also played centre-back for Belgium's under-21s. Already capped at senior level.

Memphis DEPAY

Age 22, Manchester United (Eng) & Holland

Yet to sparkle for United despite being handed the famous number seven shirt.

Olivier DESCHACHT

Age 34, Anderlecht & Belgium

New Entry Left-back and club captain who has played his way back into the national side.

PROFILED LAURENT DEPOITRE ON PAGE 49

Lassana DIARRA

Age 30, Marseille & France

New Entry Excelling at Marseille, he has forced his way back into the French national squad.

PROFILED ANGEL DI MARIA ON PAGE 50

Marcelo DIAZ

Age 29, Celta Vigo (Spa) & Chile

A key figure in Chile's 2015 Copa America triumph, the "Chilean Xavi" recently moved to Spain's Celta to replace Atletico-bound Augusto Fernandez.

Mauro DIAZ

Age 24, Dallas (USA) & Argentina

New Entry One of the youngest Designated Players in MLS, he enjoyed a good first year and many feel should be targeted instead of the vets.

Sergio DIAZ

Age 17, Cerro Porteno & Paraguay

New Entry Paraguay's answer to Sergio Aguero, a little striker of audacious talent who was perhaps over-played last year.

Daniel DIDAVI

Age 26, Stuttgart & Germany

New Entry Gifted playmaker behind much of Stuttgart's best moves. His contract expires this summer; a number of Bundesliga clubs are on alert.

Famara DIEDHIOU

Age 23, Clermont (Fra, loan from Sochaux, Fra) & Senegal

New Entry His goals have taken the French second tier by storm this season, scoring a goal a game to top the scoring charts.

DIOGO JOTA

Age 19, Pacos Ferreira & Portugal

New Entry Attack-minded teenager who is attracting interest from Portugal's leading clubs, notably Benfica, and is set to move at the end of the season.

Nabil DIRAR

Age 30, Monaco (Fra) & Morocco

New Entry Moroccan who has matured into a talented wide man in Monaco, starring against Arsenal in last season's Champions League knockout stage.

Borek DOCKAL

Age 27, Sparta Prague & Czech Republic

Attacking schemer who has been the Czech league's best player and been a key figure for the national side en route to Euro 2016.

Alejandro DOMINGUEZ

Age 34, Olympiakos (Gre) & Argentina

Former World Youth Cup winner enjoying a late flourish in Greece.

Giovanni DOS SANTOS

Age 26, LA Galaxy (USA) & Mexico

Provider of flair in a team that looks to be increasingly about power.

PROFILED GIANLUIGI DONNARUMMA ON PAGE 52

Jonathan DOS SANTOS

Age 25, Villarreal (Spa) & Mexico

Emerging from the shadow of elder brother Giovanni to make his mark in La Liga.

Bas DOST

Age 26, Wolfsburg (Ger) & Holland

One of Europe's most in-form marksmen in 2015, the Dutchman has stayed at Wolfsburg despite interest from English clubs.

DOUGLAS COSTA

Age 25, Bayern Munich (Ger) & Brazil

Brilliant wide man who has given Bayern a new attacking dimension this season following his 2015 move from Shakhtar.

Julian DRAXLER

Age 22, Wolfsburg & Germany

Gifted attacker who was signed by Wolfsburg last summer as a replacement for Kevin De Bruyne. A strong contender for Germany's Euro squad.

Jimmy DURMAZ

Age 26, Olympiakos (Gre) & Sweden

New Entry Born in Sweden to Syriac (Assyrian) parents and taking a starring role in the Greek league this season.

Laurent DEPOITRE

Age 27, Gent & Belgium

For someone who used to prioritise engineering studies over football, and who was playing in the Belgian third tier as recently as 2011, the bustling centre-forward is enjoying an astonishing amount of success.

Having played his part in Gent's domestic league triumph last term, and their subsequent surprise qualification for the knockout stage of the current Champions League, he won his first cap for the national side earlier this season and was second in his country's player of the year ballot for 2015.

A native of the Hainaut region of western Belgium, he played the game solely for fun as a teenager and young adult. Yet almost without realising it, he was climbing the league ladder step by step, picking up the tricks of the trade in regional competition with Association Montkainoise and RFC Tournai, before moving on to bigger and better things in the national pyramid.

Twelve months after helping Eendracht Aalst clinch the 2010-11 third division title, he left to turn professional at second-tier Oostende – and with only one year left of his university course, he no longer had the time to keep up with his classroom studies and reluctantly had to put his degree on ice.

Not that he has been short-changed of sporting recompense since.

In 2012-13, he was Oostende's top scorer as they ran away with the second-division crown, and since joining Gent in the summer of 2014 he has got down to business with a vengeance, proving insatiable in his pursuit of goals and assists.

Especially impressive in Gent's extraordinarily strong Champions League campaign – in which he tormented defenders from Valencia, Lyon and Zenit along the way – he is the sort of player who should not be judged on first impressions.

With his towering height and docker's build, the automatic assumption is that he is a one-dimensional target man, only useful for his aerial prowess and an ability to play with his back to goal. In reality, however, he boasts a far wider skill-set: a delicate touch on the ball, good vision, intelligent movement and far more speed than he is given credit for.

And while not particularly quick over the first couple of yards, he is very hard to stop when barrelling forward.

It should come as no shock that Belgium boss Marc Wilmots is an admirer. In his own playing days as a front runner, Wilmots was guts and single-mindedness personified – and Depoitre has those same core values.

"He will fight for you all match," says Wilmots. "His development has been remarkable."

That's the way of the world for a late bloomer who is keen to make every moment count.

Nick Bidwell

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Angel DI MARIA

Age 28, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Argentina

The most expensive footballer ever to play in the Premier League may have suffered something of a nightmare during his season-long ride at Manchester United, but moving to France to join Paris Saint-Germain in August 2015 has seen Di Maria finally playing with a smile on his face again. And after a worryingly difficult first few months in the capital, he is once again finding the kind of form that made him one of the world's hottest football properties.

Having been forced out of Real Madrid in August 2014, the £59.7million that United paid the Spanish side for his services seemed like a terrible piece of business as the Argentinian looked out of sorts and desperately unhappy in the north of England. But as things have turned out, United's loss has proved to be very much PSG's gain.

Having moved to Paris for €63m, Di Maria has the fans purring with pleasure once more.

Born in Rosario, he made just 39 appearances for his home-town club before being snapped up by Portuguese outfit Benfica for €3m in 2007. Within three years his market value had shot up to €30m as Real Madrid took him to Spain.

It would be overly harsh to suggest that his career then stalled at the Bernabeu – he was, after all, a Champions League winner with Real – but it's only since he's found his feet in France that he's truly been back to his best form.

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Acting both as a devastating supply line and an ice-cool finisher, he has been setting Ligue 1 alight on a weekly basis this term as PSG march to a seemingly unstoppable fourth consecutive league title.

While all the talk in France about "*El Fideo*" (the spaghetti) remains positive, there is some debate among observers as to whether he's most effective on the right flank or in the middle of the pitch. The player himself, however, has no such concerns, explaining: "I really like playing on the right. It's where I feel most at ease, even more so when I'm alongside two such great players as Ibrahimovic and Cavani.

"When I'm really involved in the game and I can get crosses in to them, it's perfect. I think it's where I'm best at PSG."

Thoroughly enjoying his time in Paris, he adds: "You learn something every day, particularly here where you've got players of the quality of Ibrahimovic, Verratti, Thiago Silva, Cavani. The list goes on.

"I'm sure there's still plenty for me to learn here and I'll carry on improving as a player."

With Paris Saint-Germain's sights firmly set on glory in the Champions League this season, coach Laurent Blanc will have high expectations of Di Maria as one of the club's major creative forces in their drive to the very top of the European game.

Howard Johnson

Balazs DZSUDZSAK

Age 29, Bursaspor (Tur) & Hungary

New Entry Pacy left-winger and experienced Hungary captain.

PROFILED ARTYOM DZYUBA ON PAGE 57

EDER

Age 29, Internazionale (loan from Sampdoria) & Italy

New Entry Brazilian-born, he qualified to play for Italy through his great grandfather.

Mohamed ELNENY

Age 23, Arsenal (Eng) & Egypt

Energetic box-to-box operator who moved from Basle to Arsenal in January 2016. One of the stars of Basle's Europa League campaign in 2015.

Breel EMBOLO

Age 19, Basle & Switzerland

Cameroon-born, fast, powerful, skilful forward who made his Swiss league debut while still at school and is already a regular for the Swiss senior side.

Vincent ENYEAMA

Age 33, Lille (Fra) & Nigeria

One of Ligue 1's best keepers, he quit Nigeria's national side last autumn when coach Sunday Oliseh stripped him of the captaincy.

Christian ERIKSEN

Age 24, Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) & Denmark

Former Ajax star who is now an important figure at Spurs. A set-piece specialist and the most skilful Danish player of his generation.

Cristian ESPINOZA

Age 20, Huracan & Argentina

New Entry Young striker aiming for a place in Argentina's Rio 2016 Olympics squad after impressing in Huracan's run in the Sudamericana Cup.

Jonny EVANS

Age 28, West Bromwich Albion (Eng) & Northern Ireland

New Entry One of the key figures in Northern Ireland's Euro 2016 qualification. An experienced Premier League campaigner.

Frank FABRA

Age 25, Boca Juniors (Arg) & Colombia

New Entry Strong, speedy left-back who has come into the national team since the Copa America, starring in World Cup qualifiers.

Cesc FABREGAS

Age 28, Chelsea (Eng) & Spain

One of the big names who allegedly fell out with Jose Mourinho earlier in the season but he is still preparing to play a key role for Spain at Euro 2016.

Diego FAGUNDEZ

Age 21, New England Revolution (USA) & Uruguay

New Entry Uruguay-born, Boston-raised. A great example of a "home-grown player" who's made it in Major League Soccer.

Ralf FAHRMANN

Age 27, Schalke & Germany

New Entry Now well established as the long-term successor to Manuel Neuer at Schalke. Recently extended his contract until 2020.

Sofiane FEGHOULI

Age 26, Valencia (Spa) & Algeria

French under-21 cap who opted to play for Algeria. A quick-witted playmaker who was recently voted La Liga's top African. His contract expires this summer.

Nabil FEKIR

Age 22, Lyon & France

Lyon academy graduate who chose to play for France ahead of Algeria. Was earning rave reviews until he suffered a serious knee injury last autumn.

FELIPE ANDERSON

Age 22, Lazio (Ita) & Brazil

Speedy attacker who was one of the stars of the 2014-15 Serie A season. Last summer Lazio rejected a major bid from Manchester United for the Brazilian.

FERNANDAO

Age 28, Fenerbahce (Tur) & Brazil

New Entry Tall, powerful striker who was loaned to eight different clubs in Brazil before finding success in Turkey.

Gianluigi DONNARUMMA

Age 17, Milan & Italy

New Entry When Milan goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma lined up in under-12 and under-13 games in his native Campania, he always caused problems as the youngster was so tall that people regularly accused his team, Club Napoli Castellammare, of fielding an overage player.

It got to be that his mother, Marinella, always made sure she had her son's birth certificate with her when she accompanied him to matches so that the referee could scrutinise the documents before the game began.

"Gigio" Donnarumma's explosion on the Italian football scene this season is the stuff of *Roy Of The Rovers* cartoon legend. In October, at the age of 16 years and eight months, he made the youngest-ever Serie A goalkeeping debut in a 2-1 home win against Sassuolo.

That fixture had been something of a watershed match for Milan's Serb coach, Sinisa Mihajlovic. Milan had picked up just one point in their three previous games and were sitting in an ignominious 12th place. With his position seemingly at risk, Mihajlovic made a bold move, naming 6ft 5in Donnarumma as his first choice instead of former Real Madrid goalkeeper Diego Lopez, who had been less than impressive in the previous game, a 1-1 draw with Torino.

The rest is history. Even if his debut was by no means perfect – he was perhaps at fault for Domenico Berardi's second-half free-kick equaliser – Donnarumma came through. And he has not been out of the team since, with Lopez seemingly destined to leave at the end of the season.

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Reserve keeper Christian Abbiati, 38, who will probably retire at the end of the campaign, was full of praise for his young rival, saying: "You've seen his qualities. The Good Lord has looked down on him and said 'you have got to be a goalkeeper'."

When he saved a penalty against Real Madrid's German midfielder Tony Kroos in a July friendly,

after being brought on for the last 15 minutes, people began to take note. Agile, and cool beyond his years, Donnarumma appears unfazed by his sudden arrival in Serie A.

Confident enough to boss his defence around, notwithstanding the age and experience difference, he looks the real thing; so much so that he has already been compared with the most iconic goalkeeper in modern Italian football, Gigi Buffon. He too was something of a boy wonder, making his Serie A debut for Parma against Milan as a 17-year-old in 1995.

It may be premature but already many observers are suggesting that when Italy need to go looking for a replacement for Buffon, then Donnarumma might be the ready-made solution.

Paddy Agnew

Augusto FERNANDEZ

Age 29, Atletico Madrid (Spa) & Argentina

New Entry Star of Velez Sarsfield's 2011 Argentinian title success. Recently joined Atletico from Celta Vigo.

FERNANDINHO

Age 30, Manchester City (Eng) & Brazil

Has played more minutes than any other Man City player this season. Humiliated at the 2014 World Cup but still in Brazil's squad.

Roberto FIRMINO

Age 24, Liverpool (Eng) & Brazil

Took time to settle at Liverpool following a £29m transfer from Hoffenheim last summer but has recently displayed signs of his undoubted talent.

Alessandro FLORENZI

Age 24, Roma & Italy

New Entry Energetic right-sided operator who has emerged as an exciting option for club and country. Rome born and bred.

Diego FORLAN

Age 36, Penarol & Uruguay

New Entry The outstanding player of the 2010 World Cup is now rounding off his career in the land of his birth with a debut in the Libertadores Cup.

Kostas FORTOUNIS

Age 23, Olympiakos & Greece

New Entry Speedy attacker who can play wide or centrally. Star of his club's defeat of Arsenal in the Champions League and a key figure for Greece.

Manolo GABBIADINI

Age 24, Napoli & Italy

Versatile right-sided attacker who is mostly used from the bench. Prolific for Italy's under-21s, he still hopes to make Euro 2016.

GABI

Age 32, Atletico Madrid & Spain

Atletico club captain and midfield lynchpin in his second spell at the club. Once admitted to being asked to fix a league match while playing for Zaragoza.

GABRIEL BARBOSA

Age 19, Santos & Brazil

New Entry The latest Santos wonderkid, "Gabi-gol" has had his ups and downs but should feature at the 2016 Rio Olympics.

GABRIEL JESUS

Age 18, Palmeiras & Brazil

New Entry Tricky support striker who did well at last year's Under-20 World Cup and was promoted to the under-23 Olympic squad.

Nico GAITAN

Age 28, Benfica (Por) & Argentina

Attacking midfielder who is now in his sixth season at Benfica despite regularly being linked with a move away from Lisbon.

Kevin GAMEIRO

Age 28, Sevilla (Spa) & France

New Entry Former PSG man who is in fine form for Sevilla this season. On course for his highest goals tally since his free-scoring days at Lorient.

Ezequiel GARAY

Age 29, Zenit (Rus) & Argentina

Experienced centre-back who featured for Argentina in the 2014 World Cup Final. Knee problems scuppered an early spell at Real Madrid.

Shkelzen GASHI

Age 27, Colorado Rapids (USA) & Albania

Swiss league's top scorer for the past two years who recently switched to MLS. Swiss-born but a key figure for Albania.

Valere GERMAIN

Age 25, Nice (loan from Monaco) & France

New Entry Monaco-raised striker who is impressing on loan at Nice. Son of former Marseille player Bruno Germain.

Jose GIMENEZ

Age 21, Atletico Madrid (Spa) & Uruguay

Highly-rated young centre-back who is already a regular for club and country.

Sebastian GIOVINCO

Age 29, Toronto (USA) & Italy

The little Italian won a string of awards in his first MLS season, including MVP and top scorer.

PROFILED MATTHIAS GINTER ON PAGE 60

Olivier GIROUD

Age 29, Arsenal (Eng) & France

Centre-forward who is now in his fourth season at Arsenal and remains first choice in spite of criticism that he is not a truly world-class marksman.

Diego GODIN

Age 30, Atletico Madrid (Spa) & Uruguay

Powerful centre-back who has arguably been the world's best defender for the past two years. Contracted to Atletico until 2019.

GOKHAN Tore

Age 24, Besiktas & Turkey

New Entry German-born wide man who has represented Turkey at all levels and is set to be a starter at Euro 2016. On Chelsea's books as a teenager.

Andre GOMES

Age 22, Valencia (Spa) & Portugal

New Entry Playmaker who has shone despite Valencia's poor season. Brought to the club by Jorge Mendes, so could be sold on soon.

Maxime GONALONS

Age 26, Lyon & France

Midfield enforcer raised at Lyon and now club captain. On the fringes of the French squad and linked with a move to England.

GONCALO GUEDES

Age 19, Benfica & Portugal

New Entry Youngster who has dazzled in his first season in Benfica's first team, scoring in the Champions League and making his senior debut for Portugal.

Cesar GONZALEZ

Age 33, Deportivo Tachira & Venezuela

New Entry Creative midfielder, known as "*El Maestrico*", and currently the most high-profile player in the Venezuelan league.

Mark GONZALEZ

Age 31, Sport (Bra) & Chile

Won an international recall after moving back to Chile before recently joining Recife in the north-east of Brazil. Born in South Africa.

Mario GOTZE

Age 23, Bayern Munich & Germany

Scorer of Germany's 2014 World Cup-winning goal and the most expensive German ever when he cost Bayern €37m in 2013.

Ricardo GOULART

Age 24, Guangzhou Evergrande (Chn) & Brazil

The most expensive signing in China last year – £12m from Cruzeiro – after winning the 2014 Brazilian championship.

Andreas GRANQVIST

Age 30, Krasnodar (Rus) & Sweden

New Entry Centre-back and now the stalwart of the Swedish national side. Playing well in Russia.

Antoine GRIEZMANN

Age 24, Atletico Madrid (Spa) & France

Has thrived in Madrid since 2014 move from Sociedad. Atletico have reportedly increased his buyout clause to €60m.

Andres GUARDADO

Age 29, PSV (Hol) & Mexico

Versatile national-team veteran (125 caps). One of the top performers in the Dutch league since a move from Valencia in 2014.

Nemanja GUDELJ

Age 24, Ajax (Hol) & Serbia

Dynamic central midfielder who was linked with a move away from Holland last year but instead went from AZ to Ajax where he has settled well.

Paulo DYBALA

Age 22, Juventus (Ita) & Argentina

Last autumn, media reports indicated that a Barcelona scout was in attendance at a series of Juventus' Champions League and Serie A games. In theory, the scout was there to keep an eye on Juve's talented Frenchman, Paul Pogba, believed by many to be destined for a €100million move to Catalonia at the end of this season.

Yet it could be that Barca have discovered another equally expensive object of their desire in

the shape of Dybala. His development in the classic inside-forward or number 10 role this season has been breathtaking – and Barcelona aren't the only ones to have shown interest.

Intelligently handled by coach Massimiliano Allegri, Dybala was introduced gradually into the first team last autumn, having arrived from Palermo for €32m. Initially, this policy earned Allegri plenty of criticism for making scant use of his outstandingly gifted signing, but it proved a wise move.

After two successful seasons at Palermo, Dybala found himself at a new-look Juventus still trying to come to terms with the departures of Carlos Tevez, Arturo Vidal and Andrea Pirlo. The club began the season poorly and Dybala often started from the bench as Allegri knew only too well that many players – Michel Platini in 1982, for example – struggle on arrival at Juve.

Allegri's instincts were proved correct. When eventually given his head in the role that was once graced by such as Alessandro Del Piero and Roberto Baggio, Dybala finally exploded. In recent times, only Pietro Anastasi in the 1968-69 season has made a better start than Dybala, who after 24 days had scored 13 goals. And as he progressed, so Juventus got their season back on track.

With his ability to float and sting just behind the front man – whether that is Mario Mandzukic, Alvaro Morata or Simone Zaza – Dybala has the ability to set up chances for his team-mate or find the net himself.

If his compatriot Gonzalo Higuain at Napoli can fairly lay claim to being the outstanding striker in Serie A this term, there is no denying the phenomenal improvement made by Dybala in the last two seasons.

And while many believe Juventus will opt to take the money for Pogba sooner or later, Juventus can be secure in the knowledge that they still have a class act on their books in the shape of Dybala.

Paddy Agnew

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John GUIDETTI

Age 23, Celta Vigo (Spa) & Sweden

New Entry Finally realising his talent in Spain after a series of false starts.

PROFILED PAULO GUERRERO ON PAGE 62

Ilkay GUNDOGAN

Age 25, Borussia Dortmund & Germany

Hugely talented but progress has been disrupted by injuries in recent years. Contract runs until 2017, so he could move this summer.

Gaston GURUCEAGA

Age 20, Penarol & Uruguay

New Entry Calm, agile keeper who was a success in Uruguay's 2015 under-20 side. Tipped to be promoted to the seniors.

Asamoah GYAN

Age 30, Shanghai SIPG (Chn) & Ghana

Captain of Ghana despite eschewing European football for the Middle East and now a lucrative contract in China.

Sebastien HALLER

Age 21, Utrecht (Hol) & France

New Entry French under-21 striker who is enjoying a prolific season in the Dutch league. Linked with a number of Premier League clubs.

Marek HAMSIK

Age 28, Napoli (Ita) & Slovakia

Spiky-haired captain of club and country. Slovakia's top scorer in the Euro qualifiers and now playing a key role in Napoli's bid for the Serie A title.

Samir HANDANOVIC

Age 31, Internazionale (Ita) & Slovenia

One of Europe's top keepers, a penalty expert who recently signed a new contract to stay at Inter til 2019.

Martin HANSEN

Age 25, Den Haag (Hol) & Denmark

New Entry Former Liverpool trainee who returned to Denmark to launch his career and is now excelling in the Dutch league.

Jack HARRISON

Age 19, New York City (USA) & England

New Entry Number one choice in the 2016 MLS draft. Born in England but moved to New York aged 14 and played college soccer.

Joe HART

Age 28, Manchester City & England

The world's highest-paid goalkeeper has responded well to dips in form to consolidate his position as England's first choice.

Eden HAZARD

Age 25, Chelsea (Eng) & Belgium

Player of the 2014-15 season in England but his loss of form in 2015-16 has mirrored Chelsea's poor campaign.

Jonas HECTOR

Age 25, Cologne & Germany

New Entry Left-back who has enjoyed a rapid rise over the past 18 months, becoming one of the new faces in Germany's post-World Cup squad.

Markus HENRIKSEN

Age 23, AZ (Hol) & Norway

New Entry Clever box-to-box operator who is tipped to move to a bigger club. Son of former Rosenborg player Trond Henriksen.

Angelo HENRIQUEZ

Age 21, Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) & Chile

New Entry Failed to break through at Manchester United but thriving in Croatia and in the Chile squad.

Javier HERNANDEZ

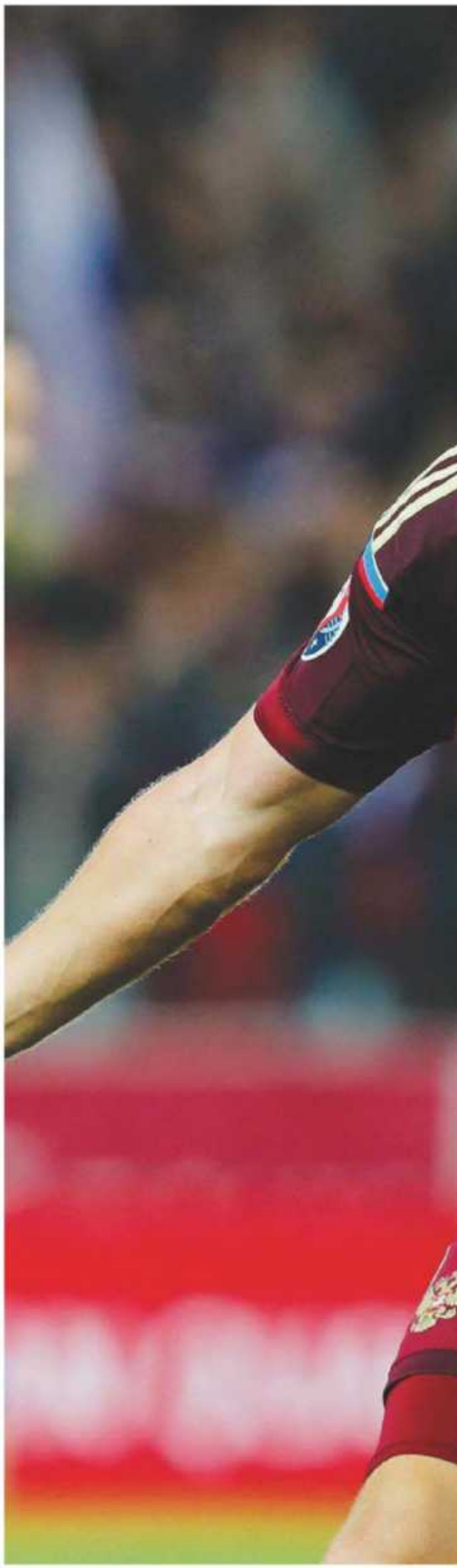
Age 27, Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) & Mexico

New Entry Discarded by Manchester United last summer but scoring regularly in the Bundesliga.

Hector HERRERA

Age 25, Porto (Por) & Mexico

One of the brightest Mexican talents of recent times, a 2012 Olympic gold medal winner who has recovered from a dip in form to star at Porto.



Artyom DZYUBA

Age 27, Zenit & Russia

Russia's top scorer in qualification for this summer's European Championship with eight goals and equally productive as Zenit topped their group in this season's Champions League – netting six goals in total against Lyon, Valencia and Gent – 6ft 5in target man Artyom Dzyuba has earned a reputation for rising to the occasion when he has a point to prove.

And the Muscovite loves nothing more than making his critics eat their words – something that he has certainly managed to do since controversially swapping Spartak Moscow for Zenit last July.

As soon as the move had been announced, the centre-forward came under heavy media fire. Slammed for a supposed lack of consistency and for his unfulfilled potential, he was also angrily "disowned" by hard-core Zenit supporters because of his long association with Spartak, who are their bitter rivals.

Rumours of him earning a king's ransom in St Petersburg – said to be €3.6million a year – only heaped on even more pressure. But how splendidly he would respond, scoring 16 goals in his first 24 games for the Russian champions and generally proving himself to be a perfect, muscular complement to the incisive runs of attack-conscious new team-mates in the shape of Hulk, Danny and Oleg Shatov.

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While not the quickest, Dzyuba certainly has all manner of attributes with which to redress the balance – not least his aerial dominance, physical presence and strong work ethic, clever positioning, subtlety on the ball and an instinctive ability to be in the right place at the right time in the box.

"Artyom has a rare ability to attract the ball," says Zenit's Portuguese coach Andre Villas-Boas. "And you can't do that without great intelligence and understanding of the game."

Winning over the doubters and naysayers has also been a theme of the striker's five-year international career.

After being omitted from the squads for Russia's Euro 2012 and 2014 World Cup campaigns, he found himself in the role of being merely a back-up option for much of Fabio Capello's reign as the national side's head coach. What he needed was something or someone to break the log-jam – and he duly had his wish granted last summer.

When Capello was fired for poor results, replacement boss Leonid Slutsky came in and made Dzyuba his first-choice striker. And an avalanche of European Championship qualifying goals followed, with the winner against Austria, four in the 7-0 dismantling of Liechtenstein and another in a 2-1 victory in Moldova.

"I'm having the best spell of my career to date," says Dzyuba. "Everything I try is coming off."

Nick Bidwell

Andre-Pierre GIGNAC

Age 30, Tigres (Mex) & France

The Mexican Liga MX is one of the world's most self-sufficient leagues. TV revenue and gate money are high enough to keep the most talented young Mexican players in the country. Foreign players, if they do join the league, tend to be Latino-Americans making the relatively short journey from MLS or South Americans who have outgrown the financial restrictions of their domestic championships.

It makes the recent experiences of Andre-Pierre Gignac all the most extraordinary. The former Lorient and Toulouse striker, a member of France's 2010 World Cup squad, left Marseille last summer, the club's need for savings forcing him out after five years and 59 goals.

He had offers from Lyon, Newcastle United and West Bromwich Albion, among others. So Tigres of Monterrey was something of a surprise destination, although becoming Liga MX's best-paid player may well have persuaded him.

The cynics have been silenced by his form in Mexico. His goals – lots of them – helped Tigres reach the Libertadores Cup Final – only the third Mexican side to do so – and win the apertura championship on penalties.

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His form did not go unnoticed back home and he was recalled by Didier Deschamps for last November's friendlies against Germany and England. It was significant because the pair had fallen out when Deschamps, then Marseille coach, dropped him for a Champions League match, with Gignac reportedly chucking a bottle across the dressing room.

"It shows that it wasn't all that bad a decision to exile myself a bit, 10,000km away from France," said Gignac.

"The Mexican league is one where at the back they're very tough. There are stubborn players from Argentina, Colombia and Brazil.

"In midfield there are some lively smaller players and in attack there are some good

goalscorers, whether they're from Mexico, Brazil or Argentina.

"When you see the Mexican national team playing you say to yourself that the Mexican league is not all that bad.

"And I really think that too because from what I've seen every weekend they're every bit as good as some Ligue 1 clubs."

Gignac may have been one of the first Europeans to succeed in Mexico but he may not be the last.

"I think I've opened a few doors," he said. "Without naming names, of course, some players have called me to ask me to talk about them with my club. So I feel I can be a trailblazer."

John Holmesdale

PROFILED GONZALO HIGUAIN ON PAGE 64

Martin HINTEREGGER

Age 23, Borussia M'gladbach (Ger, loan from Red Bull Salzburg) & Austria

New Entry Highly rated Austria stalwart.

Pierre HOJBJERG

Age 20, Schalke (Ger, loan from Bayern Munich) & Denmark

One of the big new hopes of Danish football, creative midfielder loaned out by Bayern to gain first-team action.

Keisuke HONDA

Age 29, Milan (Ita) & Japan

Still Japanese football's biggest star but his Milan future remains in doubt after being dropped to the bench by coach Sinisa Mihajlovic last autumn.

HULK

Age 29, Zenit (Rus) & Brazil

Powerful striker who is back in the Brazil squad after the humiliation of the 2014 World Cup. Big wages at Zenit have deterred clubs in west Europe.

Mats HUMMELS

Age 27, Borussia Dortmund & Germany

One of the world's top centre-backs and a key figure in Germany's 2014 World Cup triumph. Contracted to Dortmund until 2017.

Khalfan IBRAHIM

Age 27, Al Sadd & Qatar

The leading figure in domestic Qatari football, a former Asian Footballer of the Year who has played more than 80 times for his country.

Zlatan IBRAHIMOVIC

Age 34, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Sweden

The enigmatic Swede divides opinion but he is on course to win a 13th league title of his career.

Mauro ICARDI

Age 23, Internazionale (Ita) & Argentina

Exciting forward who was developed at Barcelona's academy but has found success in Italy. On the fringes of the Argentina squad.

Odion IGHALO

Age 26, Watford (Eng) & Nigeria

New Entry Striker in great form for promoted Watford this season. Previously with the Pozzo family's other clubs, Granada and Udinese.

Josip ILICIC

Age 28, Fiorentina (Ita) & Slovenia

New Entry Skilful playmaker who has played an important role in Fiorentina's impressive form this season.

Andres INIESTA

Age 31, Barcelona & Spain

The World Cup-winning star remains a world-class talent – as proven by his brilliant performance when Barca thrashed Real Madrid last autumn.

INIGO Martinez

Age 24, Real Sociedad & Spain

Highly-rated centre-back who remains a Sociedad player despite interest from a number of other clubs. His release clause is set at €30m.

Lorenzo INSIGNE

Age 24, Napoli & Italy

Diminutive left-winger born and raised in Naples. Linking well with Gonzalo Higuain as Napoli push for the Serie A title.

Andreas ISAKSSON

Age 34, Kasimpasa (Tur) & Sweden

Sweden's first-choice keeper since 2004 and their most capped current international.

ISCO

Age 23, Real Madrid & Spain

Attacking midfielder whose form dipped under Rafa Benitez but has started more games under new coach Zinedine Zidane.

Dhurgham ISMAIL

Age 21, Caykur Rizespor (Tur) & Iraq

Left-winger who recently moved to Turkey. The leading talent in the Iraqi national side.

Matthias GINTER

Age 22, Borussia Dortmund & Germany

New Entry Since joining Borussia Dortmund from Freiburg in a €10million deal in the summer of 2014, this versatile defender has run the whole gamut of human emotions. He has known pride and excitement, frustration and heartache. And now he has experienced the ultimate satisfaction of coming back from the brink.

A non-playing member of Germany's World Cup-winning squad of 2014, Ginter surprisingly found it hard to settle in at Dortmund. Whether used as a centre-back or holding midfielder by the *Schwarz-Gelben* (black and yellows) he was, more often than not, seen as something of a liability, eventually losing his place in Jurgen Klopp's side and spending most of the campaign on the bench.

Throughout the 2015 off-season, rumours circulated thick and fast that the Dortmund management would cut their losses and sell him to Borussia Monchengladbach or Stuttgart. Even Ginter himself admits he was contemplating a fresh start away from the Westfalenstadion. But as luck would have it, new coach Thomas Tuchel had another plan in mind.

With his hand forced by the unavailability of right-back Lukasz Piszczek with a long-term hip complaint, Tuchel opted to fill the void with Ginter. And what a success the switch has proved as he instantly got to grips with his new position and is emerging as arguably the best attacking full-back in the Bundesliga.

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Obviously relishing the wider scope of his new role, he made no fewer than seven league goals in the first half of this season, and if that was not enough he also scored two of his own, including a header in a 3-2 Ruhr derby victory over Schalke in November.

"If I'd known how much fun I was going to have as a right-back, I would have asked permission to play there a long time ago," said Ginter, who was a product of the Freiburg academy and a first-teamer there at the age of 18.

"I wasn't expecting to have this much licence to push forward and I've so much more freedom when we're in possession. I'm pleased I'm now a right-back and will remain so in the near future."

His makeover is good news for Germany as well. Ever since Philipp Lahm retired from international football 18 months ago, the right-back slot has been parched terrain for national team coach Joachim Low.

And with the likes of Sebastian Rudy, Antonio Rudiger and Emre Can all flattering to deceive, it was only a matter of time before the reborn and realigned Ginter was slotted in, appearing in each of the *Nationalmannschaft's* last three fixtures of 2015.

Tuchel is not merely inspiring Ginter and Dortmund at the moment; he solves German national team problems too.

Nick Bidwell

Ander ITURRASPE

Age 26, Athletic Bilbao & Spain

Defensive midfielder whose form has been hit by injuries over the past year, dropping out of the national-team picture, but is still a key figure for Athletic.

Marc JANKO

Age 32, Basle (Swi) & Austria

New Entry Tall, much-travelled striker who is back in Europe and scoring in the Swiss league and keen to feature for Austria at the Euros.

JEMERSON

Age 23, Monaco (Fra) & Brazil

New Entry Strapping centre-back who did well in the last two Brazilian championships, winning an international call-up last year before a 2016 move to Europe.

Roberto JIMENEZ

Age 30, Olympiakos (Gre) & Spain

New Entry Keeper also known as Roberto. His 2010 transfer from Benfica to Zaragoza was controversial due to a third-party deal.

JOAO MOUTINHO

Age 29, Monaco (Fra) & Portugal

Playmaker who will be invaluable at Euro 2016 as an experienced head in an exciting young Portugal side.

PROFILED JOAO MARIO ON PAGE 67

Andreas JOHANSSON

Age 33, Norrkoping & Sweden

New Entry Central defender who played an important role in Norrkoping's first Swedish title success for 23 years.

JONAS

Age 31, Benfica (Por) & Brazil

New Entry Last year's player of the season in Portugal has continued his scoring feats this campaign, challenging Gonzalo Higuain for the ESM Golden Shoe.

Stevan JOVETIC

Age 26, Internazionale (Ita) & Montenegro

New Entry Versatile second striker who has got his career back on track in Serie A after a poor spell at Manchester City.

Luka JOVIC

Age 18, Benfica (Por) & Serbia

Serbian wonderkid who signed a five-and-a-half-year deal with Benfica in January. Was Red Star's youngest goalscorer after making his debut aged 16.

JUANFRAN

Age 31, Atletico Madrid & Spain

Consistently excellent right-back who came through the ranks at Real Madrid but made his name at Osasuna before a switch to Atletico in 2011.

Zlatko JUNUZOVIC

Age 28, Werder Bremen (Ger) & Austria

Free-kick wizard born in Yugoslavia, raised in Austria. Likely to take a central attacking role for Austria at Euro 2016.

Pavel KADERABEK

Age 23, Hoffenheim (Ger) & Czech Rep

New Entry Attacking right-back who was the Czech league's hottest player before a move to Germany in 2015.

Shinji KAGAWA

Age 26, Borussia Dortmund (Ger) & Japan

Back at Dortmund after his disappointing spell at Manchester United and playing as a creator rather than as a goalscorer.

KAKA

Age 33, Orlando City (USA) & Brazil

Former World Player of the Year is enjoying life in MLS, making and scoring goals. Very popular with the local Latino population.

Lovre KALINIC

Age 25, Hajduk Split & Croatia

New Entry One of Europe's most promising young keepers. A recent move to Aston Villa fell through after he was refused a work permit.

Nikola KALINIC

Age 28, Fiorentina (Ita) & Croatia

New Entry One-time Blackburn Rovers reject who starred for Dnipro in the Europa League and has been a revelation at Fiorentina.

Paulo GUERRERO

Age 32, Flamengo (Bra) & Peru

When Corinthians signed the Peruvian centre-forward from Hamburg in July 2012, it was a real coup. This was an international striker of genuine pedigree, at the peak of his powers, rather than a veteran looking for a late-career adventure, swapping European club football for the Brazilian game. Could this be a portent of the future?

With the Brazilian economy moving quickly from recession to fully fledged depression, and the currency weakening, that dream turned out to be nothing more than a brief flicker.

Guerrero, however, quickly became an idol at Corinthians, scoring the winning goal in that December's Club World Cup Final in Japan. His importance to the cause can be gauged by the fact that his two headed goals during the tournament, against Al Alhy and then Chelsea in the Final, were the only efforts on target that Corinthians managed in their two games.

But having established an undisputed place in the club's history, Guerrero went looking for one last pay day and fell out with the club over the terms of a new contract. After playing for Peru at the 2015 Copa America in Chile, he joined Flamengo – a signal that, despite the local game losing its best players to China, let alone Europe, Brazilian football continues to enjoy a financial advantage over the rest of the continent.

So far, he has hardly lived up to expectations in Rio. Injuries have been a problem, and three league goals in 15 games for his new club was a disappointing return.

With the club president, Eduardo Bandeira, making it his priority to reduce Flamengo's debt and get their finances in order, the fans have been understanding and even re-elected him despite some lean years on the pitch.

This year, however, those supporters are

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expecting to see results. There will be pressure on coach Muricy Ramalho's side to perform in the Brazilian championship and their star striker to live up to his billing.

It is a big year for Guerrero's international career. He performed magnificently during the last two Copa Americas, but where Peru really want him to shine is in their 2018 World Cup qualification campaign, where the team got off to a disappointing start.

Guerrero will be 34 by the time things get under way in Russia, and probably past his best. But in this year's eight rounds of qualifiers his country will look to him to lead the line and claim a place at the finals for the first time since 1982.

Tim Vickery

Kevin KAMPL

Age 25, Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) & Slovenia

Dynamic attacker who impressed in six months at Dortmund before a summer 2015 switch to Leverkusen. German born, raised in Slovenia.

Harry KANE

Age 22, Tottenham Hotspur & England

One of English football's great success stories of recent times. National team regular two years after being loaned out to the Championship.

N'Golo KANTE

Age 24, Leicester City (Eng) & France

New Entry One of the revelations of the season, a midfield dynamo who has been crucial to Leicester's unlikely title challenge.

Robbie KEANE

Age 35, LA Galaxy (USA) & Republic of Ireland

An example of an ageing Designated Player who has done exceptionally well in MLS, with 73 goals in 108 games since 2011.

Neeskens KEBANO

Age 23, Genk (Blg) & DR Congo

New Entry One of the Belgian league's most exciting players. Ex French youth international.

Wahbi KHAZRI

Age 25, Sunderland (Eng) & Tunisia

New Entry Attacking schemer who starred for Bordeaux before a move to Sunderland.

PROFILED AHMED KHALIL ON PAGE 68

Sami KHEDIRA

Age 28, Juventus (Ita) & Germany

New Entry Back in business – for Juve and the German national side – after a number of injury-hit seasons at Real Madrid.

Joshua KIMMICH

Age 21, Bayern Munich & Germany

German under-21 cap who has settled well at Bayern following a summer transfer. The long-term successor to Xabi Alonso.

Gabor KIRALY

Age 39, Szombathelyi Haladas & Hungary

New Entry Veteran keeper, famous for his baggy grey tracksuit bottoms. One of the stars of Hungary's Euro 2016 qualification.

Davy KLAASSEN

Age 22, Ajax & Holland

Attacking midfielder, captain of Ajax and Holland regular who has played for his country at all levels from under-16. Tipped to leave this summer.

KOKE

Age 24, Atletico Madrid & Spain

Creative midfielder who has come through the ranks at Atletico to be a major figure in the club's recent success. An important fixture for Spain, too.

Aleksandr KOKORIN

Age 24, Zenit & Russia

Versatile attacker – striker, winger or playmaker – who will be a key figure for Russia at Euro 2016 – if he can stay fit.

Vincent KOMPANY

Age 29, Manchester City (Eng) & Belgium

Powerful, dominant centre-back whose absence through injury has disrupted his club's league campaign.

Yevhen KONOPLYANKA

Age 26, Sevilla (Spa) & Ukraine

New Entry Star of Dnipro's Europa League run last year. Opted to join the "more technical" Spanish Liga over England.

Julian KORB

Age 23, Borussia M'gladbach & Germany

New Entry Right-back tipped to make the step up to Germany's seniors after playing at last summer's Euro under-21 tournament.

Laurent KOSCIELNY

Age 30, Arsenal (Eng) & France

New Entry Centre-back who has been a reassuring presence at the heart of Arsenal's title challenge this season.

Gonzalo HIGUAIN

Age 28, Napoli (Ita) & Argentina

During a holiday in Ibiza last July, Napoli and Argentina striker Gonzalo Higuain had an altercation with a supporter, early one morning outside a nightclub.

"Ah, come on, you can't even take a penalty properly," said the fan, annoyed that Higuain would not stop for the ritual selfie.

Higuain's annoyance was most untypical for a player whose off-the-field behaviour in three seasons in Italy has always been impeccable. Yet, there was no denying that a particularly sore point had been touched.

Last season, the prolific Higuain missed two vital spot-kicks: one for Argentina in their Copa America Final loss to Chile and the other in a last-day Napoli v Lazio Champions League decider, eventually won 4-2 by Lazio.

By the beginning of this campaign, critics were beginning to wonder if the Higuain-Napoli connection was about to end, given his "troubled" moment. It says much about the overall quality of this season's Napoli and Higuain's understanding with new coach Maurizio Sarri that the Argentinian has thus far had a stupendous season, realising an average of a goal per game.

By the beginning of February, in only 23 games, he had already scored more goals than the 22 that last season's joint-top scorers Mauro Icardi of Internazionale and Luca Toni of Verona managed in 36 and 38 matches respectively. If he keeps on at this rate, he risks becoming the highest seasonal goalscorer of the Italian post-war era, a record currently held by Antonio Angelillo, who scored 33 for Inter in the 1958-59 season.

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Asked to evaluate Higuain recently, former Juventus, Milan, England and Russia coach Fabio Capello pronounced: "You want to ask me about Higuain? I'm the guy who brought him to Real Madrid as an 18-year-old. He was already very good but he got better with me.

"He's a fantastic player, one of the best pure centre-forwards around, because that is his game. He is powerful, determined, he gets in front of goal and he scores."

Having arrived at Napoli three summers ago, after six seasons in Madrid, Higuain was very much the finished product, who had no difficulty in assuming an inspirational role. That has increased to such an extent this term that he has prompted comparisons with his famous compatriot at Napoli 30 years ago, Diego Maradona.

He is, of course, a totally different player, but like Maradona, he is a great team player, a class act whose genius always fits into the team context.

Able to play off either foot, gifted with a powerful shot, Higuain is the prototype modern striker, one who not only scores but who also works hard, wins possession and lays on the final, winning pass.

If Napoli do win this season's Serie A title, that trophy will have "Higuain" written large all over it.

Paddy Agnew

Kalidou KOULIBALY

Age 24, Napoli (Ita) & Senegal

Tough, imposing centre-back who has proved to be an adept signing for title-chasing Napoli. Can also play at full-back and midfield.

Mateo KOVACIC

Age 21, Real Madrid (Spa) & Croatia

New Entry Elegant midfielder who has yet to hold down a first-team place in Madrid but a regular starter for Croatia.

Christoph KRAMER

Age 25, Bayer Leverkusen & Germany

Played on for 14 minutes after suffering concussion in the 2014 World Cup Final before being subbed.

Matias KRANEVITTER

Age 22, Atletico Madrid (Spa) & Argentina

One of the stars of River Plate's 2015 Libertadores success. Moved to Atletico in January 2016.

Toni KROOS

Age 26, Real Madrid (Spa) & Germany

Complete midfielder who joined Real Madrid in a €25m deal from Bayern Munich after winning the 2014 World Cup.

Max KRUSE

Age 27, Wolfsburg & Germany

New Entry Quick, technically-gifted striker who left Monchengladbach for Wolfsburg last summer. Late developer who broke through at St Pauli.

Grzegorz KRYCHOWIAK

Age 26, Sevilla (Spa) & Poland

Touch-tackling central midfielder who can also play in defence. Nicknamed "the plumber" because he does the dirty work.

Juraj KUCKA

Age 29, Milan (Ita) & Slovakia

New Entry Energetic defensive midfielder who scored crucial goals, notably against Spain, in Slovakia's successful Euro 2016 qualifying campaign.

Sven KUMS

Age 28, Gent & Belgium

New Entry Captain of Champions League surprise package Gent, a midfield organiser who once failed to make the grade at Anderlecht.

Layvin KURZAWA

Age 23, Paris Saint-Germain & France

Left-back who made a surprise switch to PSG from Monaco last summer but has had a big impact in the French capital.

Dirk KUYT

Age 35, Feyenoord & Holland

Veteran forward who has enjoyed an Indian summer in Rotterdam during a second spell at Feyenoord. Scored 13 goals in the first half of the Dutch season.

KWON Chang-hoon

Age 21, Suwon Bluewings & South Korea

New Entry Attacking midfielder who was one of the stars of South Korea's success at the Asian under-23 championship.

Alexandre LACAZETTE

Age 24, Lyon & France

Goalscorer who has not repeated his prolific form of 2014-15 in this campaign but is still likely to feature for France at Euro 2016.

Kyle LAFFERTY

Age 28, Norwich City (Eng) & Northern Ireland

New Entry Much-travelled centre-forward whose goals were crucial to Northern Ireland's Euro 2016 qualification.

Philipp LAHM

Age 32, Bayern Munich & Germany

Germany's 2014 World Cup-winning captain who is playing at right-back for Bayern after a switch to central midfield last season.

Erik LAMELA

Age 23, Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) & Argentina

One of Argentina's brightest talents and scorer of spectacular "rabona" goals. More first-team starts with Spurs this season.

Aymeric LAPORTE

Age 21, Athletic Bilbao (Spa) & France

Highly rated France under-21 centre-back. Only the second Frenchman, after Bixente Lizarazu, to play for Athletic.

Cyle LARIN

Age 20, Orlando City (USA) & Canada

New Entry The big surprise of the 2015 MLS season, with 17 goals in his first campaign.

Ezequiel LAVEZZI

Age 30, Hebei China Fortune (Chn) & Argentina

Right-sided forward who left PSG in February and joined the exodus to China.

PROFILED PIERRE-MICHEL LASOGGA ON PAGE 70

Miguel LAYUN

Age 27, Porto (Por, loan from Watford, Eng) & Mexico

Attack-minded left-back or wing-back who is thriving in Portugal after an uncertain time at promoted Watford.

LEE Dong-gook

Age 36, Jeonbuk Motors & South Korea

New Entry Veteran striker who struggled at Middlesbrough but is now the all-time top scorer in the Asian Champions League.

Robert LEWANDOWSKI

Age 27, Bayern Munich (Ger) & Poland

Brilliant finisher who has flourished at Bayern this season with more service from the flanks. Key man for Poland, too.

Stephan LICHTSTEINER

Age 32, Juventus (Ita) & Switzerland

New Entry Dynamic right-back who had minor heart surgery last year but is back for club and country.

Damian LIZIO

Age 26, Botafogo (Bra, loan from Bolivar) & Bolivia

New Entry Naturalised Bolivian capped by Argentina under-20s. A busy little midfielder, much-travelled, who now plays in Brazil.

Fernando LLORENTE

Age 31, Sevilla & Spain

New Entry Former Athletic Bilbao and Spain striker who is back in his country after two indifferent seasons at Juventus.

Hugo LLORIS

Age 29, Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) & France

Captain of both club and country. Has been in exceptional form in Tottenham's challenge for a Champions League spot.

Carlos LOBATON

Age 36, Sporting Cristal & Peru

New Entry Central midfielder who has improved with age. A fine striker of the ball, useful from set-pieces. Picked in the team of last year's Copa America.

Nicolas LODEIRO

Age 26, Boca Juniors (Arg) & Uruguay

Attacking midfielder who enjoyed a title success last autumn with Boca Juniors after less successful spells in Brazil and Holland.

Shane LONG

Age 29, Southampton (Eng) & Rep Ireland

New Entry Striker who will play a key role for Eire at Euro 2016. A willing runner but often accused of lacking real quality.

Brian LOZANO

Age 22, Club America (Mex) & Uruguay

New Entry Shone as Uruguay won gold last year in the Pan-American Games and was promoted to the senior squad.

Hirving LOZANO

Age 20, Pachuca & Mexico

Tricky young winger who has shone for Mexico's under-20s, earning a call-up to the senior side and a likely place at the 2016 Rio Olympics.

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JOAO MARIO

Age 23, Sporting Lisbon & Portugal

In an age when strength, speed and stamina are attributes many coaches consider indispensable in their midfield players, watching the elegant Joao Mario dominate matches is an absolute delight for fans of the more artistic exponents of the beautiful game.

Having impressed from the moment he made his senior debut on loan at Primeira Liga club Vitoria Setubal in the second half of the 2013-14 season, he was recalled by his parent club, seized his opportunity at Sporting early the following term and has not been out of the side since.

Some feared for his development upon the appointment of Jorge Jesus at the Alvalade as the charismatic coach had developed a reputation for mistrusting Portuguese talent in his time at Benfica. But those concerns have been firmly quelled as Joao Mario has taken his game to the next level in dazzling style, becoming a key player for the title-chasers.

Gliding gracefully around the pitch, he is always available for the ball but never dwells on it. One, two or three sure touches with either foot are sufficient to quicken his team's momentum, opening up defences with a perfectly weighted through ball or ensuring that possession is shielded from the opposition.

Most impressive of all is his football intelligence, instantaneously taking the correct option no matter how limited the time and space.

Throw in a generous work rate and a temperament that enables him to remain composed in the most frenetic of environments and it's no surprise that Joao Mario has been many people's choice as the outstanding performer in Portugal this season. And he is a player who increasingly looks primed to hit the heady heights.

"It's said that from the neck downwards they are all good players, but from the neck upwards only some are," says Sporting's youth coach Tiago Capaz, who was the first coach at the club to work with him. "Joao has superb ability to read the game. At Sporting we would do exercises when we gave clues and strategies, and the kids had to find the solution. Joao often found solutions even better than those we had thought of."

A highly promising generation of Portuguese midfielders are beginning to make a name for themselves around Europe. Should Joao Mario sustain his current progress, he may take a place in the pantheon of Portuguese midfield royalty alongside Mario Coluna, Paulo Sousa and Rui Costa.

"I've no idea what his limit is," says Capaz. "Week by week he gets better and better. He's standing out in a team that's top of the table, plays good football and scores lots of goals.".

Barring injury, it is reasonable to expect Joao Mario to shine in France at Euro 2016 – and Sporting will no doubt have Europe's biggest clubs knocking on their door with chequebook in hand.

Tom Kundert

Ahmed KHALIL

Age 24, Al Ahli & UAE

New Entry His older brother, UAE international Faisal Khalil, may have once been arrested for allegedly employing a witch doctor to curse a rival for a starting spot, but there have been no such controversies for the 2015 Asian Player of the Year, who has defenders seeking divine intervention whenever he takes to the pitch.

Having seemingly been around for years despite being only 24, Ahmed Khalil is still not yet at the peak of his powers. There is, however, a sense that he is shifting towards top gear – as 13 international goals in 11 games last year suggests.

His purple patch started at the 2015 Asian Cup in January when he helped UAE to third place, eliminating defending champions Japan along the way. He finished the tournament in Australia as the second-top scorer and he occupies the same position in the charts in qualification for the 2018 World Cup.

Last year was a decent one for his club too, as Khalil scored six goals in the Asian Champions League, helping Al Ahli to the Final. Unfortunately the Dubai side did not do themselves justice against China's Guangzhou Evergrande and they never really looked like scoring in 180 minutes of football.

For the national team, Khalil benefits from playing in front of Omar Abdulrahman, who is probably the best playmaker in Asia, and alongside the talented Ali Mabkhout, but he is also capable of making chances for himself. His movement in the box is top notch, and even in tight areas he is usually able to get a shot on goal. Not only that, he also takes a mean free-kick – you only have to look at the one he scored against Saudi Arabia in October's World Cup qualifier for evidence.

Very much part of the UAE's so-called "golden generation" that has emerged over the last few years, coming up together through the various youth teams and taking part in the 2012 Olympics, Khalil is now an established member of the senior side, who hope to go to Russia and add to their solitary World Cup finals appearance in 1990.

Supporters are also keen to see at least one of that group head to Europe – and Khalil would be better suited to the move than most.

While club owners in West Asia are reluctant to let their well-paid stars leave, older brother Faisal was one of the few to make the move, travelling to France in 2008. However, the UAE FA refused to release his international registration and Al Ahli's president, who also happened to be the Crown Prince of Dubai, got involved and the player returned home.

Things have changed a lot in UAE football since then – and Ahmed Khalil has what it takes to show the world exactly how much.

John Duerden

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LUAN

Age 22, Gremio & Brazil

New Entry Elegant support striker with a big year ahead. He will lead the Gremio attack in the Libertadores Cup and may well make the Olympic team.

LUCAS LIMA

Age 25, Santos & Brazil

New Entry Late developer who blossomed in 2015. Left-footed midfielder with the capacity to organise the game and play a killer pass.

LUCAS MOURA

Age 23, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Brazil

The Brazilian has been forced down the PSG pecking order by the arrival of Di Maria but his form last term saw him recalled by Brazil.

Diego LUGANO

Age 35, Sao Paulo (Bra) & Uruguay

New Entry Giant centre-back, former Uruguay captain now back at the club where he made his name over a decade ago.

Romelu LUKAKU

Age 22, Everton (Eng) & Belgium

Powerful striker who is enjoying a fine season at Everton, justifying the £28m paid to Chelsea in 2014. Will be a central figure for Belgium at Euro 2016.

Phakamani MAHLAMBI

Age 18, Bidvest Wits & South Africa

New Entry One of South Africa's most exciting prospects.

PROFILED RIYAD MAHREZ ON PAGE 72

Yunus MALLI

Age 24, Mainz (Ger) & Turkey

New Entry Attacking midfielder capped at all levels up to under-21 by Germany but opted to play for Turkey.

Pavel MAMAEV

Age 27, Krasnodar & Russia

New Entry Strong form this season for Krasnodar has seen the deep-lying midfielder called up to the national side ahead of Euro 2016.

Federico MANCUELLO

Age 26, Flamengo (Bra) & Argentina

New Entry Left-footed midfielder just signed by Flamengo. Exploded in 2014 after taking a more central role.

Mario MANDZUKIC

Age 29, Juventus (Ita) & Croatia

Ex Bayern and Atletico striker whose move to Juventus last summer was the third time he had joined a Champions League Final runner-up.

Kostas MANOLAS

Age 24, Roma (Ita) & Greece

Greek international centre-back who has quickly established himself as one of the best defenders in Serie A since a move from Olympiakos in 2014.

MARCELO

Age 27, Real Madrid (Spa) & Brazil

Left-back and Madrid stalwart (since 2007) who was blamed for Brazil's 2014 World Cup humiliation but is now back in the squad.

Claudio MARCHISIO

Age 30, Juventus & Italy

Turin-born, a cornerstone of the Juventus midfield for the past eight seasons and also a regular for the national side.

MARQUINHOS

Age 21, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Brazil

Talented young centre-back, viewed as the "future of PSG" by Laurent Blanc and already a regular in the senior Brazil squad.

Anthony MARTIAL

Age 20, Manchester United (Eng) & France

Exciting youngster cost Manchester United €50m last summer and has been one of the few positive aspects of a poor season.

Fidel MARTINEZ

Age 26, Pumas (Mex) & Ecuador

New Entry Winger or support striker dubbed "The Ecuadorian Neymar". Increasingly important part of the national team squad.

Jackson MARTINEZ

Age 29, Guangzhou Evergrande (Chn) & Colombia

A revelation at Porto but stalled at Atletico Madrid. Now gambling on a high-profile transfer to China.

Javier MASCHERANO

Age 31, Barcelona (Spa) & Argentina

One of Barcelona's "captains", a leader at the back, though he plays in midfield for his country.

Nemanja MATIC

Age 27, Chelsea (Eng) & Serbia

A vital component of Chelsea's league title win in 2015, his form has stumbled in the first half of this season, along with many of his team-mates.

Joel MATIP

Age 24, Schalke (Ger) & Cameroon

Strong, composed centre-back. Out of contract this summer, he has signed a pre-contract to join Liverpool.

Blaise MATUIDI

Age 28, Paris Saint-Germain & France

Consistently excellent for club and country. Won every domestic trophy with PSG last season and voted footballer of the year.

MAXWELL

Age 34, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Brazil

New Entry The Brazilian left-back has won three titles with PSG but may move on at the end of the season when his contract expires.

MEHMET Topal

Age 29, Fenerbahce & Turkey

New Entry Defensive midfielder and mainstay of the Turkish national side. Survived a shooting while driving home from training in Istanbul last year.

Alexander MEIER

Age 33, Eintracht Frankfurt & Germany

Veteran striker in his 12th season at Eintracht. The Bundesliga's top scorer in 2014-15, with 19 goals in 26 games.

Angel MENA

Age 28, Emelec & Ecuador

New Entry Tricky left winger and sometime full-back. Has played a big part in Emelec's recent success. If Miler Bolanos is sold, can he step up?

Dries MERTENS

Age 28, Napoli (Ita) & Belgium

Clever wide man or attacker who was once rejected by Anderlecht for being too small. Currently enjoying success in Italy after starring in Holland.

Lionel MESSI

Age 28, Barcelona (Spa) & Argentina

The world best's player has put concerns over his tax affairs aside to play some wonderful football with Neymar and Luis Suarez.

Thomas MEUNIER

Age 24, Club Brugge & Belgium

Right-back who has been one of the consistent performers in the Belgian league. Signed a new contract until 2019 to deter transfer interest.

Jon Obi MIKEL

Age 28, Chelsea (Eng) & Nigeria

New Entry Looked to be heading out of Chelsea under Jose Mourinho but has played an important role in midfield under Guus Hiddink.

Arkadiusz MILIK

Age 21, Ajax (Hol) & Poland

One of the brightest stars of the Dutch league, he made his loan move from Bayer Leverkusen to Ajax permanent last summer.

Yerry MINA

Age 21, Santa Fe & Colombia

New Entry Hulking, centre-back who excels in the air. Has already picked up considerable experience in South America's club competitions.

Pierre-Michel LASOGGA

Age 24, Hamburg & Germany

New Entry Thirty odd years ago, virtually every Bundesliga club possessed a crash-bang-wallop front-line spearhead. Now only one of the species remains: Hamburg's Lasogga.

Combative, physical, robust, powerful in the air and a guarantee of 90 minutes of acute irritation for centre-backs, the 6ft 2in, 14st Lasogga might be a throwback but that does not make him any less effective.

With his battering-ram style and indomitable spirit, he is hugely popular with Hamburg fans and is effectively a new millennium reincarnation of Horst Hrubesch, the colossus whose goals underpinned the club's European and domestic glory years of the 1980s.

Born and brought up in the German football heartland that is the Ruhr, Lasogga is the classic example of a player from that largely blue-collar area: uncomplicated, raw-boned, wholehearted and unstinting in his efforts.

The irony is, though, that he is anything but a typical football character.

Most unusually for the professional game, his mother, Kerstin, serves as his agent. During his formative years he never seemed able to settle, flitting from one academy to the next at Schalke, Rot-Weiss Essen, Wattenscheid, Wolfsburg and Bayer Leverkusen.

As he piled up the goals for Leverkusen's under-19 side, club director of sport Rudi Voller had no hesitation predicting the brightest of futures for him. But even with a German all-time great in his corner, he once again got itchy feet, bidding farewell to the BayArena after just 12 months and signing in 2010 for Hertha Berlin, where he would promptly break into the elite mainstream.

Now in his third season at Hamburg, he is not always a model sportsman either. After the club's victory over second-tier Greuther Furth in the relegation/promotion play-off in 2014 – a game in which he powered home a memorable header – his post-match celebrations in front of the opposition bench were totally uncalled for and he was criticised widely for it.

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Another fault line is a certain susceptibility to injury. Lasogga spent the best part of nine months on the sidelines in 2012 and 2013 recovering from torn cruciate ligaments, and this term he has been constantly troubled by a problem with his right shoulder.

Nick Bidwell

Riyad MAHREZ

Age 25, Leicester City (Eng) & Algeria

New Entry No one player typifies the remarkable rise of Leicester City than their Algerian winger. Two years ago he was playing in the French second division; now he is on the brink of a remarkable league triumph and is coveted by some of Europe's top clubs.

Mahrez has sparkled as one of Leicester's main attacking outlets, with his pace and trickery helping the team to spring defence into an attack spearheaded by Jamie Vardy. His brilliant goal against Chelsea, when he bamboozled experienced full-back Cesar Azpilicueta and struck a powerful shot with little backlift, was one of the moments of the season. It also solidified his case for being voted player of the season.

Mahrez was born in Sarcelles in the northern suburbs of Paris to an Algerian father and Moroccan mother. Dismissed as too slight by French club academies, he played for his local club, Sarcelles, in the sixth division of French football until the age of 17.

Even when he stepped up to fourth-tier Quimper, and still as an amateur, a number of top-flight clubs – Lens, PSG and Lyon – looked at him but decided against taking him, even for their reserve sides. But Le Havre took the plunge and Mahrez signed his first professional contract at the age of 19.

The Normandy club has a strong history of developing talent and famously clashed with Manchester United over the poaching of a teenage Paul Pogba.

Despite impressing at Le Havre and being dubbed the "Algerian Di Maria", Mahrez remained under the radar of most European clubs. But Leicester were one of the few that were tracking him as his contract with Le Havre entered its final year in 2014. An offer of £400,000 to Le Havre was enough to seal a deal in January 2014.

In his first 18 months at Leicester, as they won promotion to the Premier League and then pulled off a miraculous escape last season, Mahrez did little to suggest he would play such an important role this year. He was on the bench as often as he was a starter for manager Nigel Pearson's side.

However, a number of factors changed last summer. The arrival of Claudio Ranieri, replacing Pearson in a surprise move from Leicester's Thai owners, gave the team a new game plan which has played to Mahrez's strengths. N'Golo Kante, a new signing from Caen, has given Leicester's midfield extra dynamism and allowed Mahrez's maverick skills to flourish. And Mahrez has matured as an individual, marrying his English girlfriend and living a more stable home life.

There has been international recognition, too, beating Yacine Brahimi to the Algerian Player of the Year award. Europe's big guns are said to be circling and a new £35,000-a-week, four-year deal signed last year may not be enough for Leicester to see off suitors this summer.

John Holmesdale

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MIRANDA

Age 31, Internazionale (Ita) & Brazil

Outstanding centre-back who made the switch from Spain to Serie A last summer. Increasingly important to Brazil's national side.

Henrikh MKHITARYAN

Age 27, Borussia Dortmund (Ger) & Armenia

New Entry Struggled in his first season at Dortmund but now back to his best under coach Thomas Tuchel.

Luka MODRIC

Age 30, Real Madrid (Spa) & Croatia

Outstanding playmaker for club and country. Says he will see out his Madrid contract until 2018 despite rumours of a move to Bayern.

Jefferson MONTERO

Age 26, Swansea City (Eng) & Ecuador

In and out of the Swansea side after starring in Mexico but a crucial personality for his national side.

Cesar MONTES

Age 19, Monterrey & Mexico

New Entry One of Mexican football's outstanding young prospects. Has been watched by a number of European clubs, including Roma.

Javier MORALES

Age 36, Real Salt Lake (USA) & Argentina

New Entry One of the best-ever signings in MLS. Inspirational playmaker and goalscorer who was a title winner in 2009.

Alvaro MORATA

Age 23, Juventus (Ita) & Spain

Striker who was pushed out of Real Madrid but then helped Juventus to the 2015 Champions League Final and the Italian league title.

Hector MORENO

Age 28, PSV (Hol) & Mexico

Tough-tackling centre-back who broke the leg of English defender Luke Shaw last year.

PROFILED MARLOS MORENO ON PAGE 75

Thiago MOTTA

Age 33, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Italy

Combative midfielder who won two caps for Brazil then switched allegiance to Italy.

PROFILED JORDAN MORRIS ON PAGE 76

Benjamin MOUKANDJO

Age 27, Lorient (Fra) & Cameroon

New Entry Cameroon international in great form for Lorient in Ligue 1 after a summer switch from Reims.

Thomas MULLER

Age 26, Bayern Munich & Germany

Arguably the biggest star of German football, a brilliantly effective goalscorer. Recently extended his Bayern contract until 2021.

Moises MUNOZ

Age 36, America & Mexico

New Entry Veteran keeper who has been an important figure in America's recent success. Recovered from a serious car accident in 2012.

Luis MURIEL

Age 24, Sampdoria (Ita) & Colombia

Stocky South American striker brought to Europe by Udinese. Now at Sampdoria but linked with a summer transfer away.

Ahmed MUSA

Age 23, CSKA Moscow (Rus) & Nigeria

Pacy, tricky wide man who can play on either flank. Has thrived in Russia this season and a move to a major league is on the cards.

Yvon MVOGO

Age 21, Young Boys & Switzerland

New Entry Highly rated Cameroon-born keeper who has played for Swiss under-21s and has since been called up by the seniors.

Elmir NABIULLIN

Age 20, Rubin Kazan & Russia

Highly promising left-back who made his senior international debut for Russia last year. Tipped to make a move to a western European league soon.

Radja NAINGGOLAN

Age 27, Roma (Ita) & Belgium

All-action midfielder, nicknamed "The Ninja", who moved to Italy as a teenager and is now well established in the Roma side.

NALDO

Age 33, Wolfsburg (Ger) & Brazil

Tall, commanding centre-back who has played an important role in Wolfsburg's recent success. In his 11th Bundesliga season.

Nahitan NANDEZ

Age 20, Penarol & Uruguay

New Entry Combative, dynamic under-20 central midfielder who is already important for his club and may well soon be in the national team, too.

Jesus NAVAS

Age 30, Manchester City (Eng) & Spain

Still an important player for City but has fallen out of contention for the Spanish national side. Could move on this summer.

Keylor NAVAS

Age 29, Real Madrid (Spa) & Costa Rica

New Entry Agile shot-stopper who has been in terrific form for Real Madrid since their attempts to sign David De Gea failed.

Cheikh N'DOYE

Age 29, Angers (Fra) & Senegal

New Entry Combative, goalscoring central midfielder who has been the stand-out performer in Angers' rise up the ranks of French football.

Manuel NEUER

Age 29, Bayern Munich & Germany

Rated the world's best No1, he became the top-earning keeper when signing a contract that ties him to Bayern until 2019.

NEYMAR

Age 24, Barcelona (Spa) & Brazil

Dazzling alongside Messi and Suarez in Barca's brilliant front line, but his future is uncertain.

PROFILED **OUMAR NIASSE** ON PAGE 78

Casimir NINGA

Age 22, Montpellier (Fra) & Chad

New Entry One of the discoveries of the French season. Signed from the Gabonese league.

PROFILED **NEMANJA NIKOLIC** ON PAGE 80

Nicolas NKOULOU

Age 25, Marseille (Fra) & Cameroon

Popular centre-back, captain of Cameroon. Out of contract this summer and being watched by a number of Premier League clubs.

Christian NOBOA

Age 30, Rostov (Rus) & Ecuador

Important figure in the Ecuador national side. Back in Russia after a brief spell in Greece, earned on the back of his performances at the 2014 World Cup.

NOLITO

Age 29, Celta Vigo & Spain

Late developer who was prolific in the first half of the Liga season. Linked with Barcelona and a reunion with his former Barca B coach Luis Enrique.

Paul-Georges NTEP

Age 23, Rennes & France

Cameroon-born striker who made his senior France debut last year after making a big impact in Ligue 1 with Rennes.

Ashraf NU'MAN

Age 29, Hajer (Sau) & Palestine

New Entry Leading scorer for the Palestine national side that made its debut in the 2018 World Cup qualifiers. Currently playing in Saudi Arabia.

Shinji OKAZAKI

Age 29, Leicester City (Eng) & Japan

Japanese striker who was mediocre during a spell in the Bundesliga but has starred in Leicester's remarkable league campaign.

Karim ONISIWO

Age 23, Mainz (Ger) & Austria

New Entry One of Austrian football's brightest prospects, he moved to the German Bundesliga in the January 2016 transfer window.

Marlos MORENO

Age 19, Atletico Nacional & Colombia

New Entry After the promise and the performances of 2014, when they reached their first World Cup quarter-finals, Colombia's national team seemed to lose its way last year. The good news, though, was that the local championship threw up an interesting crop of youngsters – of which Moreno is one of the leading lights.

Having appeared in cup games, and one league win in which Atletico Nacional fielded a reserve side, the teenager made his genuine debut until September 2015 – just 10 days before his 19th birthday – and marked the occasion with a goal against Deportivo Cali.

By this time Nacional were coached by Reinaldo Rueda, who took Ecuador to the last World Cup, but it was his predecessor, Juan Carlos Osorio, currently in charge of Mexico, who left a lasting impression on Moreno. "I was a centre-forward," he recalls, "and it was professor Osorio, because of my speed and skill, who put me out wide."

Osorio is well known for his love of attacking down the flanks and he saw that the youngster had the attributes to run at defenders, cutting in from the left on to his stronger right foot.

Moreno was also handy in and around the penalty area and he scored a vital goal in December's second leg of the Torneo Finalizacion play-off Final against Junior of Barranquilla, taking the game to penalties and eventual success for Atletico.

Winning the league title means Moreno now has a Libertadores Cup campaign to look forward to this year – and there is also the possibility that he could compete in the summer's Olympic tournament, providing Colombia can get past the USA in a play-off.

These are heady days for someone who is still getting used to being recognised in the street, and it will be interesting to see how he copes with the changes in his life.

An administrative error meant that he was registered as "Marlos" rather than the intended "Marlon". But if he can build on what he achieved in the last few months of 2015, few will have trouble remembering his name.

Tim Vickery

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK #WS500

Jordan MORRIS

Age 21, Seattle Sounders & USA

New Entry Jordan Morris is a phenomenon in American soccer. The Seattle-born youngster was the first college player called up to the US national team since 1999, then in January 2016 he signed the most lucrative "Homegrown" player contract ever offered to an American when he agreed to join Seattle Sounders.

It was a significant moment for Major League Soccer. Morris had been heavily courted by Bundesliga side Werder Bremen – encouraged, it seems, by Andi Herzog, the former Austria international who is now Jurgen Klinsmann's number two with the US national side. If the league can't secure one of the most talented players of his generation, who can it sign?

Morris first entered the national-team picture when Klinsmann spotted him at Stanford University and invited him to train with the national team when they used Stanford as a training camp ahead of the 2014 World Cup.

"He's a forward, very simple," Klinsmann said after calling up Morris to the senior squad in August 2014. "He reads the game very well ahead, he sees the space in front of him and can take people on one against one. At the same time he knows his path is a different one. We see the talent."

Klinsmann, conscious that the world of college soccer is a wholly different one to that of the professional game, encouraged Morris to turn pro. Morris spent a week in January 2016 training with Werder Bremen during the Bundesliga winter break. That had been set up by Herzog, who would later backtrack and claim he had been misquoted when local paper *Kreiszeitung* reported him as saying the goal of the national team was to bring as many players as possible to Europe.

The decision by Morris to instead sign a deal with Seattle has been interpreted by some as a rejection of the pro-Bundesliga line advocated, in private at least, by Klinsmann and Herzog.

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK #WS500

Morris now has a chance to establish himself in MLS and is likely to take the place of China-bound Obafemi Martins in an attacking partnership with Clint Dempsey at Sounders.

"He has some qualities that you can't teach," said Sounders coach Sigi Schmid. "When you find players who have that, he has an ability to shield the ball off defenders, he has really good balance and he has an ability to finish. When you have that, and the commitment and dedication to go with it, you can go a long way."

His local connection with Sounders – he played for their youth teams and his father Michael is the club's chief medical director – could also prove useful in the coming months and years as Morris seeks to live up to his immense potential.

John Holmesdale

OSCAR

Age 24, Chelsea (Eng) & Brazil

Came under fire from Jose Mourinho during Chelsea's poor autumn run but he has been revived under Guus Hiddink. Still a key figure for Brazil.

Victor OSIMHEN

Age 16, Ultimate Strikers & Nigeria

New Entry The 10-goal star of Nigeria's Under-17 World Cup win last autumn. Set to reject Arsenal for Wolfsburg.

Dani OSVALDO

Age 30, Boca Juniors (Arg) & Italy

After flopping at Porto and Southampton, the temperamental striker linked well with Carlos Tevez in Boca's recent title victory.

Nicolas OTAMENDI

Age 27, Manchester City (Eng) & Argentina

Has struggled at times to adapt to the pace of the Premier League but still a regular choice for Argentina.

Mesut OZIL

Age 27, Arsenal (Eng) & Germany

One of the stars of the Premier League season, the German has been in outstanding form as Arsenal's chief creative influence.

Leandro PAREDES

Age 21, Empoli (Ita, loan from Roma, Ita) & Argentina

Former Boca starlet who has impressed on loan at Empoli this season. Set to return to parent club Roma this summer but others are also interested.

Thomas PARTEY

Age 22, Atletico Madrid (Spa) & Ghana

New Entry Box-to-box midfielder who has been likened to Yaya Toure following his impact from the bench this season.

Javier PASTORE

Age 26, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Argentina

Mercurial talent hailed by Eric Cantona as the world's best player. His impact at PSG this season has been restricted by injuries.

PAULO OLIVEIRA

Age 24, Sporting Lisbon & Portugal

Highly-rated young centre-back who made his senior Portugal debut last year. Impressed at last year's Under-21 Euros.

Dimitri PAYET

Age 28, West Ham United (Eng) & France

Clever attacker who has excelled at West Ham since his summer switch from Marseille, earning a new contract after just six months.

Carlos PENA

Age 25, Guadalajara & Mexico

New Entry National team midfielder, nicknamed "Gullit", who was sold, reluctantly he says, by Leon to Guadalajara in January.

PEPE

Age 33, Real Madrid (Spa) & Portugal

Powerful Brazil-born centre-back whose cynical gamesmanship often detracts from his excellent footballing qualities.

Roberto PEREYRA

Age 25, Juventus (Ita) & Argentina

Versatile, dynamic former River Plate starlet who offers Juventus another attacking option.

Ivan PERISIC

Age 27, Internazionale (Ita) & Croatia

New Entry Lively attacker enjoying life in Italy after the switch from Germany last year. Likely starter for Croatia at Euro 2016.

Diego PEROTTI

Age 27, Roma (Ita, loan from Genoa, Ita) & Argentina

New Entry Clever but temperamental winger or playmaker who made the January 2016 loan switch to Roma from Genoa.

Loic PERRIN

Age 30, Saint-Etienne & France

New Entry Centre-back and captain of Saint-Etienne who has played his whole career with the club and is now on the fringes of the France squad.

Gerard PIQUE

Age 29, Barcelona & Spain

One-time Manchester United trainee widely recognised as one of the world's top defenders. Eloquent off the pitch, with a big social media following.

Guido PIZARRO

Age 26, Tigres (Mex) & Argentina

Key figure in Tigres' recent success. Has become a naturalised Mexican citizen since his move from Argentina in 2013.

Marko PJACA

Age 20, Dinamo Zagreb & Croatia

New Entry The latest young star to emerge from Dinamo. Made his senior Croatia debut aged 19 and set to feature at Euro 2016.

Miralem PJANIC

Age 25, Roma (Ita) & Bosnia

Much-coveted Bosnian playmaker who played for Luxembourg's youth teams when his family settled there after the Yugoslav war. Tied to Roma until 2018.

Paul POGBA

Age 22, Juventus (Ita) & France

The complete modern footballer: dynamic, skilful, tough. Excelling in the no 10 shirt for Juve this season but speculation is rife that he is Barcelona-bound.

Diego POLENTA

Age 24, Nacional (loan from Genoa, Ita) & Uruguay

New Entry Left-footed defender who has the talent to have achieved much more. Back home from Italy, he now has the chance.

Dennis PRAET

Age 21, Anderlecht & Belgium

Former teenage starlet who has long been tipped to make the step up to the top level of the European game. May soon be on his way from Anderlecht.

Lucas PRATTO

Age 27, Atletico Mineiro (Bra) & Argentina

Much-travelled striker who is now starring in Brazil after spells in Mexico, Norway, Chile, Italy as well as his native Argentina.

Harold PRECIADO

Age 21, Deportivo Cali & Colombia

New Entry Rangy striker who enjoyed a wonderful 2015, scoring 25 goals in 43 league games and winning the league championship.

Quincy PROMES

Age 24, Spartak Moscow (Rus) & Holland

New Entry Dutch starlet who has shone in the Russian league, prompting Spartak to place a €40m price tag on his head.

RAFA SILVA

Age 22, Braga & Portugal

Tricky youngster, likened to Eden Hazard, who has come through the ranks at northern Portuguese club Braga to feature for Portugal's seniors.

RAFFAEL

Age 30, Borussia M'gladbach (Ger) & Brazil

New Entry Attacking midfielder who has been in Europe for more than a decade and now enjoying success with Gladbach.

Ivan RAKITIC

Age 27, Barcelona (Spa) & Croatia

One of Barcelona's most consistent performers under coach Luis Enrique. Will play a central role for Croatia at Euro 2016.

RAMIRES

Age 28, Jiangsu Suning (Chn) & Brazil

Hard-running Brazilian who was sold by Chelsea to Jiangsu for £25m in one of the January transfer window's biggest moves.

Sergio RAMOS

Age 29, Real Madrid & Spain

Spanish football royalty. Captain of Real Madrid. (in his 11th season) and 130 caps for Spain. Centre-back who can also play as an attacking right-back.

Oumar NIASSE

Age 25, Everton (Eng) & Senegal

New Entry While some hard-to-please Russian critics make the rather uncharitable claim that Everton's new Senegal front runner, recently signed for £13.5million from Lokomotiv Moscow, spurns as many chances as he converts, all those defenders he has terrorised out east might beg to differ.

With 13 goals in 23 games for Lokomotiv in all competitions this term, the force-of-nature

second striker or wide man indubitably kept his part of the marksmanship bargain. And as every Russian league adversary of his knows, he has several other strings to his bow: his physicality and ability to bully, his energy and commitment, his penetrative qualities and a good dollop of selflessness, racking up 10 assists in 2015-16.

Voted the Russian Premier League's player of the year for 2015 by readers of the *Sovetskiy Sport* newspaper – picking up nearly half the total votes – Niasse's style of play has much more of the wild stallion about it than the polished technician. Unpredictable and unconventional, his default setting is to insist on forcing the issue, and whether galloping forward with the ball or shooting on sight, it's his instincts plotting the course. Wind him up and let him rip.

Rock-hard self-belief and steely determination are two of his most precious commodities, and such fortitude has served him well at various stages of his career. During his first European posting, a six-month loan deal in 2012 with Norwegian club Brann, Niasse made no impact at all before being discarded. He also had an unsuccessful screen test the following year in France with Saint-Etienne.

He was eventually bought by Turkish club Akhisarspor for €250,000 and everything suddenly clicked. He enjoyed an excellent inaugural season in the Super Lig, with 12 goals and a half-dozen assists to earn a €4.5 million move to Lokomotiv.

In his first season in the Russian capital, he was mainly on half-rations, starting only infrequently and netting just four elite goals. But then he scored the opener in the 3-1 victory over Kuban Krasnodar in the 2015 Cup Final and within a few months he would be a first-team regular, the focal point of coach Igor Cherevchenko's counter-attacking strategy.

Tenacious, tough and talented, Niasse should fit in admirably at Goodison Park.

Nick Bidwell

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK #WS500

Nemanja NIKOLIC

Age 28, Legia Warsaw (Pol) & Hungary

New Entry Talk about a Magnificent Magyar. Ever since pitching up at Legia Warsaw last summer, the Hungarian international striker has barely paused for breath in his sold-out, one-man show, netting 21 goals in his first 21 games in the Polish top flight and deservedly being voted Ekstraklasa Player of 2015 by his fellow professionals.

Acquired for only €500,000 from Hungarian club Videoton, where he was twice a domestic champion, he is described by Legia director of recruitment Michal Zewlakow as having "goals in his blood" and that is no word of a lie.

In five years leading the Videoton line, he amassed no fewer than 87 Hungarian league goals, twice finished as the championship's top scorer – in seasons 2009-10 and 2014-15 – and last term made headlines by scoring in each of his first 12 starts.

Responsible for exactly half of Legia's first-division goals, Nikolic may not dazzle aesthetically, yet is nonetheless an extremely effective practitioner of the point-of-attack craft, excellent at playing on the shoulder of the last defender, hard to derail when bearing down on goal, good in the air and capable of finishing coolly with either foot.

While some cynics inevitably will argue that goal upon goal in Poland is no reason to go overboard, Nikolic's exploits this term should not be devalued. If he keeps up his current strike rate he will smash the single-season Polish league scoring record of Wisla Krakow's Henryk Reyman (37 goals in 1927) – and it is worth noting that even the superstar likes of Robert Lewandowski was never so prolific in his Ekstraklasa days with Lech Poznan.

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK #WS500

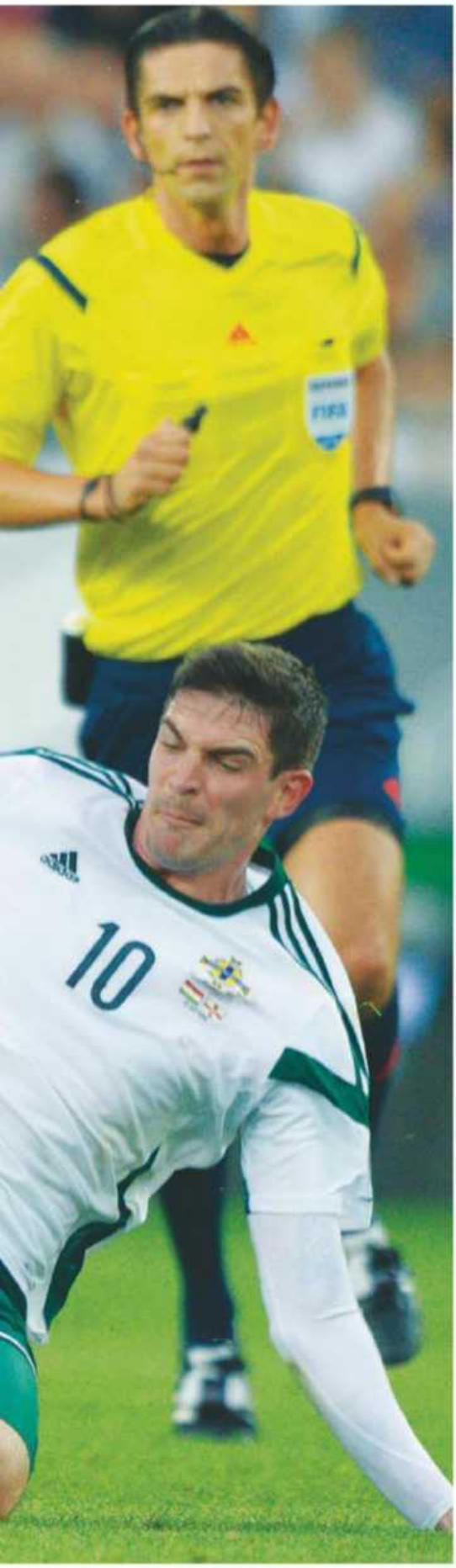
The son of a Serb father and Hungarian mother, Nikolic was born and brought up in the northern Serbia town of Senta, a community where ethnic Hungarians were very much in the majority. But he has had no split loyalties as a footballer, spending his entire senior career in Hungary, initially starting out in the lower leagues with Barcs and Kaposvolgye, then bursting into life in the top flight at Kaposvar and Videoton.

Early in 2011 Nikolic successfully applied for Hungarian citizenship, though he would have to wait patiently for his first national team call-up, making his debut for the Magyars as a late substitute in an 8-1 World Cup qualifying thrashing in Holland in the autumn of 2013.

International life was certainly to prove a wake-up call and despite appearing in nine of Hungary's games as his countrymen booked their ticket to Euro 2016 – four as a starter, five in cameo mode – he still has a lot to prove at the highest level.

But don't bet against Nikolic letting up in his goal spree with Legia – which will surely give him the impetus to make those extra yards.

Nick Bidwell



Aaron RAMSEY

Age 25, Arsenal (Eng) & Wales

Dynamic midfielder who has been unlucky with injuries. On his day, one of the best midfielders in Europe. Will be a pivotal figure for Wales at Euro 2016.

Pepe REINA

Age 33, Napoli (Ita) & Spain

New Entry Former Liverpool no 1 who opted to join Bayern as Manuel Neuer's understudy but is now starring in Napoli's Serie A title challenge.

RENATO SANCHES

Age 18, Benfica & Portugal

New Entry Teenage attacking starlet taking Portuguese football by storm this season. The subject of a reported £60m bid by Manchester United.

Marco REUS

Age 26, Borussia Dortmund & Germany

Talented attacker who missed the 2014 World Cup through injury but is now playing and starring regularly again for Dortmund.

Jose Antonio REYES

Age 32, Sevilla & Spain

Veteran winger who is back at first club Sevilla where he is captain, having led them to Europa League success last year.

RICARDO OLIVEIRA

Age 35, Santos & Brazil

New Entry Veteran centre-forward who returned from the Middle East to be the top scorer of last year's Brazilian Championship.

Arjen ROBBEN

Age 32, Bayern Munich (Ger) & Holland

Injury-prone, missing the business end of last season, but still a major figure for Bayern, capable of changing games.

RODRIGO CAIO

Age 22, Sao Paulo & Brazil

New Entry Technically gifted centre-back or defensive midfielder, voted player of the 2014 Toulon tournament. Must be in contention for the Olympics.

James RODRIGUEZ

Age 24, Real Madrid (Spa) & Colombia

Star of the 2014 World Cup who fell out of favour at Rafa Benitez's Real Madrid but recalled by Zinedine Zidane.

Martin RODRIGUEZ

Age 21, Colo Colo & Chile

New Entry Bright little attacking player who will be expected to give some spark to an ageing Colo Colo side this year.

Cristiano RONALDO

Age 31, Real Madrid (Spa) & Portugal

Still the equal of Messi but approaching the beginning of the end at Madrid. Will Euro 2016 be his last hurrah?

Wayne ROONEY

Age 30, Manchester United & England

Under par this season – in a poor Manchester United side – but still likely to lead England's forward line at the Euros in France.

Cristian RIVEROS

Age 33, Olimpia & Paraguay

Moved back home in 2015 after seven years away. Retains an eye for goal, and his steady hand was an important factor in his side's 2015 championship win.

RUBEN NEVES

Age 18, Porto & Portugal

Assured midfielder tipped as Porto's next big thing. It remains to be seen whether he will be affected by the club's mid-season change of coach.

RUI PATRICIO

Age 28, Sporting Lisbon & Portugal

New Entry Ever present for Sporting in their title challenge this season and will also start for Portugal at Euro 2016.

Victor RUIZ

Age 27, Villarreal & Spain

New Entry Former under-21 centre-back who has excelled for Villarreal this term as the "Yellow Submarine" seek a return to the Champions League.

Dominic SOLANKE

Age 18, Vitesse (Hol, loan from Chelsea) & England

New Entry The latest in a long line of young Chelsea hopefuls to be farmed out to Vitesse, teenage front-runner Dominic Solanke must now decide whether to remain in Holland for another term or go back to England next season and stake his claim for a Premier League spot.

With his pace and eye for goal, Solanke has made quite an impact in Arnhem, with pundit and former Dutch international Rene Van der Gijp believing there is only one logical choice.

"For his career it would be better to spend a few more years at Vitesse," says Van der Gijp. "After playing one year in Holland it's impossible to get much playing time at Chelsea. The gap is immense."

Van der Gijp's argument is supported by the fate of other Chelsea youngsters – such as Wallace, Gael Kakuta and Tomas Kala – who returned home after experiencing the Eredivisie but still failed to make the grade at Stamford Bridge.

In fact, the only player who went on to become anything like a first-team regular with the Blues is Nemanja Matic – and even the Serb midfielder had to take a detour to Benfica before being re-signed by the club.

Born in England of Nigerian descent, Solanke's pedigree is impressive. With Chelsea since 2005, he scored 20 goals in 25 games for their under-18s and won the UEFA Youth League, finishing the competition as top scorer with 12 goals in nine matches. He was also tournament joint-top scorer as England won the 2014 European Under-17 Championship, and his performances on the international stage earned him the chance to train with Roy Hodgson's senior squad.

In October 2014, Jose Mourinho made him Chelsea's youngest Champions League debutant when he sent him on as a substitute against Maribor, and the Portuguese would later say that Solanke would only have himself to blame if he did not become an England international under his management.

While everyone knows how that ended, Solanke is also having to adapt to a new coach at Vitesse after Peter Bosz left for Maccabi Haifa during the winter break. And until a permanent new boss is installed at Chelsea, Solanke is likely to remain in limbo. As he himself says: "Normally, I would stay until next summer. But it's up to Chelsea."

Klaas-Jan Droppert

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK
#WS500

Mohamed SALAH

Age 23, Roma (Ita) & Egypt

Livewire Egyptian attacker who has overcome the setback of being frozen out by Chelsea to thrive in Serie A, first at Fiorentina, now Roma.

Carlos SALCEDO

Age 22, Guadalajara & Mexico

New Entry Left-sided centre-back who has emerged as one of Mexican football's brightest prospects. Played two seasons in Major League Soccer.

Mbwana SAMATTA

Age 23, Genk (Blg) & Tanzania

New Entry Striker who was crowned CAF's best African-based player in 2015 when playing for TP Mazembe. Recently joined Genk.

Alexis SANCHEZ

Age 27, Arsenal (Eng) & Chile

Copa America winner with Chile in 2015 and Arsenal's hero in the 2015 FA Cup Final. Injuries permitting, he will play a key role in the title race.

Leroy SANE

Age 20, Schalke & Germany

New Entry One of the stars of the Bundesliga season, a youngster who can play in various attacking roles. Made his senior Germany debut in autumn 2015.

Michael SANTOS

Age 22, River Plate & Uruguay

New Entry Uncomplicated striker, quick and strong, who was part of Uruguay's gold medal winning Pan-American Games team.

Hisato SATO

Age 33, Sanfrecce Hiroshima & Japan

New Entry Veteran striker whose goals, often spectacular, have helped Sanfrecce win three J.League titles in the past four years.

SAUL Niguez

Age 21, Atletico Madrid & Spain

Highly prized starlet who can play in defensive midfield or wide. Agreed a new Atletico contract until 2020 in the face of interest from Man Utd.

Andre SCHURRLE

Age 25, Wolfsburg & Germany

A member of Germany's 2014 World Cup-winning squad. Struggling to command a starting place back at Wolfsburg but still in the Germany squad.

Bastian SCHWEINSTEIGER

Age 31, Manchester United (Eng) & Germany

Vastly experienced central midfielder. Starter for United, injuries permitting, and captain of Germany.

Luis Manuel SEIJAS

Age 29, Santa Fe (Col) & Venezuela

New Entry Crafty left-footed midfielder who was his country's most successful export in 2015, winning the Sudamericana Cup.

SELCUK Inan

Age 31, Galatasaray & Turkey

New Entry Scorer of the goal, a stunning last-minute free-kick against Iceland, that sealed Turkey's place, against the odds, at Euro 2016.

Yevhen SELEZNYOV

Age 30, Dnipro & Ukraine

New Entry Tenacious, hard-working striker who helped Dnipro to the 2015 Europa League Final and Ukraine to Euro 2016.

Matz SELS

Age 24, Gent & Belgium

New Entry Former under-21 keeper who is on the fringes of the senior Belgian side. Was recently voted Belgium's best keeper for his role in Gent's rise.

SEMIH Kaya

Age 25, Galatasaray & Turkey

New Entry Central defender who has been linked with a number of top European clubs but remains contracted to Galatasaray until 2018.

Lars STINDL

Age 27, Borussia Monchengladbach & Germany

New Entry Of all the uncapped German players still harbouring hopes of forcing their way into the Euro 2016 reckoning, the Gladbach attacker is arguably the most deserving of the waiting-room candidates.

His form this season for his club, who he joined from Hanover for €8.5million last summer, has verged on the sensational, scoring 13 goals in all competitions and creating 11 more. And if *Bundestrainer* Joachim Low really does operate a meritocracy, the 27-year-old should, as a matter of course, be inducted.

Not that his new life at Borussia Park started particularly auspiciously.

On the losing side in each of his first five Bundesliga fixtures, he struggled to make an impact and, for his pains, came in for much criticism, most of it unwarranted.

After five years with Hanover, two of them as skipper, he was always going to need a little time to adapt to a different setting. And he was certainly not helped in those dark early days by coach Lucien Favre's apparent uncertainty as to his best position, one moment using him as a defensive midfielder, the next out wide on the right or as a lone front-man.

The turning point came in late September, when Favre resigned and, crucially for Stindl, the new man in charge, former reserve-team boss Andre Schubert, would be much more specific in what he wanted, turning him loose in a free-wheeling, slightly withdrawn striking role.

Schubert had cracked the code and the front-line combo of Stindl and Raffael immediately clicked into high gear as Borussia surged up the table on the back of a 10-game unbeaten run.

Schubert's decision to use him in the hole makes total sense. With Stindl's technical ability, movement and finishing skills, the role of flexible front runner fits him like a glove.

"Lars is an amazingly intelligent player and we've a great understanding," says his Brazilian team-mate Raffael.

"It's a pleasure to watch him in action," adds keeper Yann Sommer. "He always seems to find the right solution to problems."

Stindl also has a fan in Gladbach's technical director of sport, Max Eberl, who says: "I'd been following his progress since he was a youth-team player with Karlsruhe and was delighted to finally get him to sign for me. He's been producing outstanding performances for years.

"Whether successfully fighting relegation with Hanover or playing in the Champions League for us, he's someone who delivers under pressure."

Three times on target in this term's Champions League – getting Gladbach's first-ever goal in the competition in a 2-1 home loss to Manchester City and grabbing two more in the 4-2 victory over Sevilla – Stindl is living proof that good things, sometimes, take time.

Nick Bidwell

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK #WS500

SERGI Roberto

Age 24, Barcelona & Spain

New Entry Barcelona academy product whose versatility has proved invaluable for a squad restricted by the FIFA-enforced transfer embargo.

Xherdan SHAQIRI

Age 24, Stoke City (Eng) & Switzerland

Clever attacker whose signing was a coup for Stoke. Will be one of Switzerland's most important players at Euro 2016.

Oleg SHATOV

Age 25, Zenit & Russia

New Entry Midfield all-rounder who is likely to start for Russia at Euro 2016. Key performer in Zenit's unbeaten Champions League group stage.

Kolbeinn SIGTHORSSON

Age 25, Nantes (Fra) & Iceland

New Entry Iceland's main striker, with an impressive scoring record. Now in France after four injury-plagued years at Ajax.

Gylfi SIGURDSSON

Age 26, Swansea City (Eng) & Iceland

Set-piece specialist and Iceland's main source of creativity. Scored six goals in the Euro 2016 qualifiers.

David SILVA

Age 30, Manchester City (Eng) & Spain

The brains behind Man City's best attacking moves and increasingly important to Spain in the post-Xavi era. Can play in various positions.

Jonathan SILVA

Age 21, Boca Juniors (loan from Sporting Lisbon, Por) & Argentina

New Entry Left-back who is set to feature for Argentina at the Rio Olympics. Back home after a disappointing spell in Lisbon.

Gio SIMEONE

Age 20, Banfield (loan from River Plate) & Argentina

Son of Atletico Madrid coach Diego and top scorer at the 2015 South American Under-20s, now on loan at Banfield.

Daley SINKGRAVEN

Age 20, Ajax & Holland

Highly-rated attacking midfielder who has been in and out of the Ajax side since a €7m move from Heerenveen in January 2015.

Pione SISTO

Age 21, Midtjylland & Denmark

The biggest talent in Danish domestic football. Born in Uganda to Southern Sudanese parents. Made his senior Danish debut last year.

Martin SKRTEL

Age 31, Liverpool (Eng) & Slovakia

New Entry Tough-looking but injury-prone centre-half. Captain of the Slovakia side that qualified for Euro 2016.

Islam SLIMANI

Age 27, Sporting Lisbon (Por) & Algeria

New Entry Striker whose goals have been central to Sporting's title challenge this season. Contract has a €30m release clause.

Igor SMOLNIKOV

Age 27, Zenit & Russia

New Entry Goalscoring, attack-minded right-back or wing-back who will most likely start for Russia at the Euros this summer.

Fyodor SMOLOV

Age 26, Krasnodar & Russia

New Entry Tall striker who has begun to realise his potential at Krasnodar after a series of disappointing loan spells while at Dynamo Moscow.

Wesley SNEIJDER

Age 31, Galatasaray (Tur) & Holland

Attacking midfielder who has been a regular maker and taker of chances in the Turkish league.

Roberto SOLDADO

Age 30, Villarreal & Spain

New Entry Striker who is rediscovering his scoring touch in Spain after a frustrating spell in England.

PROFILED DOMINIC SOLANKE ON PAGE 82

SOKRATIS Papastathopoulos

Age 27, Borussia Dortmund (Ger) & Greece

New Entry Established at the heart of the Dortmund defence. Recently extended his contract until 2019.

Yann SOMMER

Age 27, Borussia M'gladbach (Ger) & Switzerland

Swiss international number one who has developed into one of the Bundesliga's top keepers since moving from Basle in 2014.

Jonathan SORIANO

Age 30, RB Salzburg (Aut) & Spain

One of the most successful Spanish playing exports. A prolific scorer in five seasons at Salzburg.

Roberto SORIANO

Age 25, Sampdoria & Italy

New Entry Versatile attacking midfielder who made his Italy debut during the Euro 2016 qualifiers. Sampdoria captain but may move on soon.

Ismael SOSA

Age 29, Pumas (Mex) & Argentina

New Entry Speedy striker who led the Pumas attack that reached the Final of the recent Mexican apertura championship.

Darijo SRNA

Age 33, Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) & Croatia

Veteran right-back and captain of Croatia. Still at Shakhtar despite the club's relocation but his contract is set to expire this summer.

Raheem STERLING

Age 21, Manchester City & England

Pacy, gifted attacker. Has coped well with the £49m fee paid by City last summer.

John STONES

Age 21, Everton & England

The most promising young English defender to emerge for many years. Wanted by Chelsea last summer.

PROFILED
LARS STINDL
ON PAGE 84

Stefano STURARO

Age 22, Juventus & Italy

Italian under-21 cap who is fast maturing into an important figure in the Juventus midfield, covering for the injured Sami Khedira.

Luis SUAREZ

Age 29, Barcelona (Spa) & Uruguay

Bounced back from his 2014 ban to play wonderful football as one of Barca's "three amigos" alongside Messi and Neymar.

Jonathan TAH

Age 20, Bayer Leverkusen & Germany

New Entry One of the brightest young centre-backs in the Bundesliga, a towering presence in his debut season for Leverkusen.

Ciprian TATARUSANU

Age 30, Fiorentina (Ita) & Romania

New Entry Likely first-choice for Romania at Euro 2016 after seven clean sheets in qualifying.

Marc-Andre TER STEGEN

Age 23, Barcelona (Spa) & Germany

New Entry German under-21 cap who features for Barca in cup and Champions League games.

Carlos TEVEZ

Age 32, Boca Juniors & Argentina

Won league titles in two different countries in 2015. First the Serie A crown with Juventus; then with Boca on his return to Argentina.

THIAGO ALCANTARA

Age 24, Bayern Munich (Ger) & Spain

Gifted attacker who is finally displaying his talents in the Bundesliga after a dreadful run of injuries.

THIAGO SILVA

Age 31, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Brazil

One of the world's best defenders but has not been called up by Brazil since last summer's Copa America.

Yaya TOURE

Age 32, Manchester City (Eng) & Ivory Coast

The past 12 months have been full of contradictions for Yaya Toure. He was captain of the winning Ivory Coast side at the African Nations Cup, making him a strong contender to be voted CAF African Footballer of the Year, an award he had won for the four previous years. Yet the prize went instead to Borussia Dortmund striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang, prompting Toure to dismiss the poll of African journalists as "pathetic" and "indecent".

Aubameyang amassed 143 points, with Toure coming second with 136 points and Ghana's Andre Ayew, top scorer at the Nations Cup, third with 112

points. At the CAF ceremony. Toure appeared gracious, paying tribute to Aubameyang, a prolific scorer in the Bundesliga and the first Gabonese player to win the award. However, later, when speaking to French radio, Toure admitted: "I'm very, very disappointed. It's sad to see Africa react this way, that they don't think African achievements are important.

"I think this is what brings shame to Africa, because to act in that way is indecent. But what can we do about it? Us Africans, we don't show that Africa is important in our eyes.

"We favour more what's abroad than our own continent. That is pathetic."

Timing is in crucial such awards. Aubameyang's goals for Dortmund were fresh in the minds of the voters, while memories of Toure's achievement in winning a second Nations Cup with Ivory Coast in February 2015 – he scored a penalty in the Final shootout – has long since faded.

Toure's status as the leading African player of the past decade is not in dispute. But his performances over the past 12 months for Manchester City have been mixed. The big Ivorian is not helped by his deceptive, ambling gait, which makes him appear disinterested and disconnected in games in which City do not perform. Injuries, too, have not helped the general malaise, as City conceded the 2015 Premier League title to Chelsea and have fallen behind to Leicester, Arsenal and Tottenham in this year's increasingly unpredictable race.

The arrival of Pep Guardiola at City next season is unlikely to help Toure's cause. The Spaniard, when Barcelona coach, preferred Sergio Busquets as his midfield general and sanctioned the sale of Toure to City for £25million in July 2010.

It is hard to see how Toure, who will be 33 in May, can play a central role in Guardiola's demanding heavy-pressing game. After a European club career that has taken in Beveren, Metalurh Donetsk, Olympiakos, Monaco, Barcelona and now City, the more gentle demands of the Chinese Super League may prove appealing.

Certainly Toure's agent, Dimitry Seluk, is adamant that "Yaya will leave the club". With a year to run on his City contract that might be the best outcome for all concerned parties.

John Holmesdale

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK
#WS500

Romain THOMAS

Age 27, Angers & France

New Entry Giant 6ft 4in defender who has been one of the standout performers for impressive newcomers Angers in Ligue 1 this season.

Ryan THOMAS

Age 21, PEC Zwolle (Hol) & New Zealand

Exciting wide man who has already established himself in the Dutch league and made his senior debut for New Zealand.

Youri TIELEMANS

Age 18, Anderlecht & Belgium

Brussels-born talent who made his Belgian league and European debut for Anderlecht aged 16 and has been watched by many of Europe's leading clubs.

Corentin TOLISSO

Age 21, Lyon & France

New Entry The latest talent to emerge from Lyon's youth system. A midfield controller with a strong short-passing game. Ever present for Lyon this season.

Erick TORRES

Age 23, Houston Dynamo (USA) & Mexico

Talented goalscorer for Chivas-USA (22 goals in 2014) but has struggled at Houston under Scottish coach Owen Coyle.

Zoran TOSIC

Age 28, CSKA Moscow (Rus) & Serbia

New Entry A flop at Manchester United when signed as a teenager but has developed into one of the leading lights in the Russian league.

Francesco TOTTI

Age 39, Roma & Italy

Roma's grand old man continues to defy the years and is now third in the list of Serie A all-time appearances.

PROFILED
YAYA TOURE
ON PAGE 86

Ibrahima TRAORE

Age 27, Borussia M'gladbach (Ger) & Guinea

New Entry One of the stars for Guinea at last year's African Nations Cup. A regular under new Gladbach coach Andre Schubert.

Kevin TRAPP

Age 25, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Germany

New Entry Former Germany under-21 cap who has displaced Salvatore Sirigu as PSG's number one this season.

Takashi USAMI

Age 23, Gamba Osaka & Japan

New Entry Attacking starlet who is back in Japan after trying his luck in the Bundesliga with Bayern Munich. Scored 19 goals in last season's J.League.

Jaime VALDES

Age 35, Colo Colo & Chile

New Entry Veteran midfield organiser who has had a big impact since returning from Europe. The 2016 Libertadores could be his last shot at glory.

Diego VALERI

Age 29, Portland Timbers (USA) & Argentina

New Entry Masterful playmaker, with 39 assists and 25 goals in three MLS seasons. Key player in Portland's 2015 MLS title win.

Sven VAN BEEK

Age 21, Feyenoord & Holland

New Entry One of the best young defenders in the Dutch league. Has benefitted from key departures at Feyenoord but could be the next to leave.

Robin VAN PERSIE

Age 32, Fenerbahce (Tur) & Holland

Suffered the ignominy of Holland's failure to qualify for Euro 2016. But still the biggest personality in the Turkish league.

Leonel VANGIONI

Age 28, River Plate & Argentina

New Entry Left-back or left-sided midfielder who is set to leave Libertadores winners River as a free agent, following interest from clubs in Europe.

Inaki WILLIAMS

Age 21, Athletic Bilbao & Spain

"When I saw my name up on the board, I was so excited." It was February 2015 and 20-year-old Inaki Williams had just been handed his first start in European competition for Athletic Bilbao as they travelled to face Torino in Italy.

He'd already played three times in the first team but this was different and he admitted that he felt butterflies in his stomach. If so, it didn't show. Just eight minutes into the game he scored the opening goal and the shirt he wore went in a frame and up on the wall.

The shirt was historic too as Williams had just become the first black player to score for the club in its 117-year history, although he was not the first black player to play for the club: that was Jonas Ramalho in 2011. In a country where immigration is a recent phenomenon and still comparatively limited, few black players have qualified to play for Athletic Bilbao until now. Not because they are black but because they are not Basque.

Williams' father is from Liberia, his mother from Ghana, immigrants who had not been in Spain long when he was born. Raised in Bilbao, he joined Athletic at 16, the team he had supported all his life.

He has a Basque name – a Basque first name, anyway – and a Spanish passport.

"My parents came here over two decades ago and they did so much for me," he says. "I was born here, I've been here for 20 years and although you never forget your roots, I feel Basque.

"You hear people say 'A black player at Athletic? We've never seen that before.' I just laugh. My name is Inaki and I'm Basque."

He scored in the Final of the Spanish Cup against Barcelona, and even though that was only a consolation goal, he is averaging a goal every other game this season – despite not always playing through the middle – and that includes the winner against Getafe with a flick and volley so good that it will surely be among the candidates for goal of the season.

Skilful, quick and bold, he is always ready to take people on and is one of the most exciting players to emerge at Athletic for years.

They hope he will remain there for years. too. Amid interest from Liverpool, Arsenal and Manchester City, he signed a new contract in January. The buy-out clause currently stands at €50million – and it's not unthinkable that some day someone, somewhere will pay it.

Sid Lowe

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK #WS500

ZHANG Linpeng

Age 26, Guangzhou Evergrande & China

New Entry With the football world talking about all the money coming out of China and all the big, expensive stars going in, there seems to be an assumption that the opposite is not going to happen as there is nobody good enough to move from East Asia to Western Europe.

Well, Zhang Linpeng could be the one to prove the doubters wrong.

On the last day of the 2015 summer transfer window, Chelsea made a bid for the Chinese international and were ready to immediately loan him out. But the deal was rejected by Guangzhou Evergrande coach Luiz Felipe Scolari, whohe felt the deal was not right for either the player or his club.

Then, a few weeks later, there were rumours in the Cantonese media that Real Madrid had agreed a deal with the Asian champions and the famous white shirt with Zhang's name on the back was already being sold in Spain. It would, perhaps, have been a fitting move for the man who Marcello Lippi – his club coach for 30 months – once called "our Sergio Ramos" in comparison to the long-serving Madrid defender.

While Chelsea – last season's version rather than this – and the 10-time European champions might have been a step too far too soon, it doesn't mean that the athletic six-footer, who can play in the middle of the defence or at right-back, is not ready for the big time.

For Guangzhou he usually lines up in the full-back position and his driving runs down the wing have become a favourite of the 45,000 or so fans that regularly pack Tianhe Stadium. In the second leg of the 2015 Asian Champions League Final in November, a two-legged affair with the first held in Dubai, Zhang was still streaming forward, outpacing the Al Ahli defence and getting crosses into the area, in the closing moments of a long season.

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK
#WS500

For the national team he has often played in the middle but under Alain Perrin, who left only recently, he was given plenty of responsibility for building as well as stopping attacks. Time after time, he carried the ball forward from the back, looking to attract opposition midfielders and then use his passing ability to exploit the space that had been created.

It is that skill – combined with stamina, a will to win and leadership – that have made him a vital cog of the all-conquering Guangzhou team. He is versatile, consistent and determined: the kind of player that managers love.

With Guangzhou he has won pretty much all he is going to win and is now ready for the challenge of a move to Europe. If he picks the right club he could show that, when it comes to talent, China is

Raphael VARANE

Age 22, Real Madrid (Spa) & France

Elegant, speedy centre-back who has become increasingly important to both Real Madrid and the French national side.

Jamie VARDY

Age 29, Leicester City & England

New Entry Direct and pacy, he was playing non-league until four years ago. A troubled teen who is now an England regular.

Carlos VELA

Age 26, Real Sociedad (Spa) & Mexico

One of Mexico's most experienced and important players. Controversially signed by Arsenal in 2006 while aged under 18.

Kenneth VERMEER

Age 30, Feyenoord & Holland

Keeper who crossed Dutch football's great divide in 2014, leaving Ajax, the club where he spent the bulk of his career, to join Feyenoord.

Marco VERRATTI

Age 23, Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) & Italy

Attacking midfielder who has become increasingly influential at PSG since a €11m move from Italy's Pescara as a teenager.

Jan VERTONGHEN

Age 28, Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) & Belgium

Elegant centre-back who has played a crucial role in Spurs' transformation from outsiders to title contenders.

Aleix VIDAL

Age 26, Barcelona & Spain

New Entry Right-back signed by Barca as a long-term replacement for Dani Alves but unable to play until January 2016 due to a global transfer ban.

Luciano VIETTO

Age 22, Atletico Madrid (Spa) & Argentina

Signed by Atletico last summer after an impressive first season in Spain with Villarreal. Yet to become a regular starter.

David VILLA

Age 34, New York City (USA) & Spain

Veteran who was one of the few bright sparks in NYC's inaugural MLS season, with 18 goals and eight assists in a poor team.

Emanuel VILLA

Age 34, Queretaro (Mex) & Argentina

New Entry Much-travelled veteran centre-forward who was the joint-top scorer in the Mexican apertura championship.

Brandon VINCENT

Age 21, Chicago Fire & USA

New Entry Second choice in this year's MLS draft – behind Jack Harrison – so his 2016 form will give an indication of the calibre of college players.

Theo WALCOTT

Age 26, Arsenal & England

Speedy wide attacker who is now one of Arsenal's highest-paid players after signing a new deal last summer. Injuries permitting, will feature at Euro 2016.

Jonathan WALTERS

Age 32, Stoke City (Eng) & Republic of Ireland

New Entry Hard-working front man enjoying an Indian summer as an unsung hero of Ireland's Euro 2016 qualification.

Victor WANYAMA

Age 24, Southampton (Eng) & Kenya

Feisty central midfielder who may be the next to leave Southampton, where he is contracted until 2017. Captain of Kenya.

Julian WEIGL

Age 20, Borussia Dortmund & Germany

New Entry Defensive midfielder who has been the emerging star of Dortmund's revival this season. Signed from Munich 1860.

Jetro WILLEMS

Age 21, PSV & Holland

Highly-rated left-back who has returned to action after damaging knee ligaments last summer. His injury delayed a possible transfer from PSV.

Andrija ZIVKOVIC

Age 19, Partizan Belgrade & Serbia

New Entry Not a day seems to go by without at least one report of a big-beast European club drooling over Partizan Belgrade's teenage flank virtuoso.

His father, Jovica, claims to have rebuffed overtures from Real Madrid for his offspring, while the German tabloid *Bild* is adamant that Borussia Dortmund are at the front of the queue for the young Serb. Elsewhere, heavyweight French daily, sports paper *L'Equipe* believe Paris Saint-Germain rival Manchester City and Liverpool as his most likely destination.

The youngster, whose contract with Partizan runs out this summer, is absolutely spoilt for choice. But before he does leave his homeland, there are all manner of legal and administrative knots to untie.

Following his refusal to sign a new deal with Partizan, Zivkovic was recently banned from training with the first-team and the waters are being further muddied by some complex third-party issues.

Zivkovic's economic rights are owned by Cypriot club Apollon Limassol – who, like Partizan, have strong links to the Israeli super agent, Pini Zahavi – and, according to Serb newspaper *Vechernye Novosti*, Partizan will have to pay a penalty clause in excess of €3million to Apollon if the left-footed right-winger leaves on a free transfer or fails to extend his contract with the Serb champions.

All in all, it's a very messy business – and an imbroglio which FIFA may well be forced to adjudicate upon in the not-too-distant future.

The heart and soul of his country's triumph at last year's World Under-20 finals in New Zealand, Zivkovic is 100 per cent boy wonder. He dribbles with the fluidity of a Maradona, is explosive and elusive on the ball, can turn inside or out, packs a powerful shot with minimum back-lift, has an eye for a final pass and, if that was not enough, he is a free-kick wizard to boot.

The youngster has always been ahead of the curve in his career, making his first team bow for Partizan when just 16, in April 2013, and becoming the club's youngest-ever captain less than 12 months later. He is also Serbia's rawest-ever full international, winning his first cap in October 2013 at the age of only 17 years and 92 days when coming on as a substitute for Zoran Tosic in a 2-0 home friendly victory over Japan.

Little wonder the much-coveted youngster often is described as the most talented player to emerge from Serbia since legendary ex-Red Star Belgrade playmaker Dragan Stojkovic three decades ago.

In common with Stojkovic, the new kid on the block also hails from the southern city of Nis. And just like the current Guangzhou R&F coach, both possess crystalline skills to die for.

Nick Bidwell

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK #WS500

WILLIAM CARVALHO

Age 23, Sporting Lisbon & Portugal

Dynamic midfielder contracted until 2020. Still at Sporting despite interest from across Europe.

Ashley WILLIAMS

Age 31, Swansea City (Eng) & Wales

New Entry Highly rated centre-back who will be Wales' captain at the Euros.

WILLIAN

Age 27, Chelsea (Eng) & Brazil

His club's most effective player this term despite their poor form. A starter in Brazil's World Cup campaign.

PROFILED INAKI WILLIAMS ON PAGE 89

Jack WILSHERE

Age 24, Arsenal & England

The great hope of English football is out injured – again – but will be central to Roy Hodgson's plans for Euro 2016 if he can recover his fitness.

Axel WITSEL

Age 27, Zenit (Rus) & Belgium

Midfield protector who joined Zenit in a staggering €40m deal from Benfica in 2012. Could move on when his contract ends in 2017.

Chris WONDOLOWSKI

Age 33, San Jose Earthquakes & USA

New Entry The most successful American-born striker in MLS, especially since a 2009 move to San Jose.

XABI ALONSO

Age 34, Bayern Munich (Ger) & Spain

Cultured midfield pivot who has thrived in Munich after making a surprise switch to the Bundesliga from Real Madrid in 2014.

Granit XHAKA

Age 23, Borussia M'gladbach (Ger) & Switzerland

The "little Einstein" is one of Switzerland's brightest prospects. Swiss-born to Kosovan Albanian parents. Brother of Taulant.

Taulant XHAKA

Age 24, Basle (Swi) & Albania

New Entry Brother of Granit who opted to play for Albania's senior national side after representing Switzerland at various youth levels.

Andriy YARMOLENKO

Age 26, Dynamo Kiev & Ukraine

Left-sided attacker dubbed the "new Shevchenko". Signed a new five-year contract with Dynamo last autumn but is still tipped to move to the West.

Pablo ZABALETA

Age 31, Manchester City (Eng) & Argentina

Attacking right-back who has recovered from injury to reclaim his place at City. Played for Argentina in the 2014 World Cup Final.

Simone ZAZA

Age 24, Juventus & Italy

Striker who is not always first choice for Juventus but still has a knack of chipping in with some crucial goals.

ZHENG zhi

Age 35, Guangzhou Evergrande & China

Veteran national-team captain and star for China's leading club Guangzhou Evergrande.

PROFILED ZHANG LINPENG ON PAGE 90

Hakim ZIYECH

Age 22, Twente (Hol) & Morocco

Creative playmaker who is being watched by many leading scouts. Though capped by Holland at under-21 level, he opted to play for Morocco's seniors.

Luca ZUFFI

Age 25, Basle & Switzerland

New Entry Central midfielder who has played a big role for Basle over the past two seasons and is growing in importance for the Swiss national side.

THE COMPLETE LIST...

Aymen ABDENNOUR ..... Valencia & Tunisia*
Omar ABDULRAHMAN ..... Al Ain & UAE
Vincent ABOUBAKAR ..... Porto & Cameroon
Sebastian ABREU .... Sol de America & Uruguay*
ADRIEN SILVA ..... Sporting Lisbon & Portugal*
Aritz ADURIZ ..... Athletic Bilbao & Spain
Sergio AGUERO ..... Manchester City & Argentina
David ALABA ..... Bayern Munich & Austria
Jordi ALBA ..... Barcelona & Spain
P34 Paco ALCACER ..... Valencia & Spain
Toby ALDERWEIRELD . Tottenham H & Belgium*
ALEX TEIXEIRA ..... Jiangsu Suning & Brazil
ALISSON ..... Internacional & Brazil*
Dele ALLI ..... P37 .. Tottenham H & England*
ANDRE ANDRE ..... Porto & Portugal
Arda TURAN ..... P38 ..... Barcelona & Turkey
Marko ARNAUTOVIC ..... Stoke City & Austria*
Takuma ASANO .. Sanfrecce Hiroshima & Japan*
Pierre-Emerick AUBAMEYANG . Dortmund & Gab
Serge AURIER ..... PSG & Ivory Coast
Andre AYEW ..... Swansea & Ghana
Sardar AZMOUN . Rostov (loan from Rubin) & Iran
Carlos BACCA ..... Milan & Colombia
Eric BAILLY ..... Villarreal & Ivory Coast*
Cedric BAKAMBU ..... Villarreal & DR Congo*
Gareth BALE ..... Real Madrid & Wales
P36 Ever BANEGA ..... Sevilla & Argentina*
Ross BARKLEY ..... Everton & England
Abdel BARRADA ..... Marseille & Morocco*
Diego BARRETO ..... Olimpia & Paraguay*
Wilmar BARRIOS ..... Tolima & Colombia*
Augusto BATALLA ..... River Plate & Argentina
Michy BATSHUAYI ..... P40 ..... Marseille & Belgium*
Claudio BEAUVUE ..... Celta Vigo & France
Karim BELLARABI ..... B Leverkusen & Germany
Hatem BEN ARFA ..... P42 ..... Nice & France*
Lars BENDER ..... Bayer Leverkusen & Germany
Dario BENEDETTO ..... America & Mexico
Martin BENITEZ ..... Independiente & Argentina*
Karim BENZEMA ..... Real Madrid & France
Domenico BERARDI ..... Sassuolo & Italy
BERNARDO SILVA ..... Monaco & Portugal
Lucas BIGLIA ..... Lazio & Argentina
P38 Birkir BJARNASON ..... Basle & Iceland*
Jerome BOATENG .... Bayern Munich & Germany
Daniel BODE ..... Ferencvaros & Hungary*
Miler BOLANOS ..... Gremio & Ecuador
Yannick BOLASIE ..... Crystal Palace & DR Congo
Giacomo BONAVENTURA ..... Milan & Italy
Leonardo BONUCCI ..... Juventus & Italy*
Alberto BOTIA ..... Olympiakos & Spain
Gustavo BOU ..... Racing & Argentina
Sofiane BOUFAL ..... Lille & France*
Michael BRADLEY ..... Toronto & USA
Robbie BRADY ..... Norwich City & Rep Ireland*
Yacine BRAHIMI ..... Porto & Algeria
Martin BRAITHWAITE ..... Toulouse & Denmark*
Claudio BRAVO ..... Barcelona & Chile*
BRUNO Soriano ..... Villarreal & Spain*
P40 Constantin BUDESCU . Dalian Yifang & Romania*
Gigi BUFFON ..... Juventus & Italy
BURAK Yilmaz ..... Beijing Guoan & Turkey
Sergio BUSQUETS ..... Barcelona & Spain
Yohan CABAYE ..... Crystal Palace & France*
Tim CAHILL ..... unattached & Australia
CAIO ..... Grasshoppers & Brazil*
Hakan CALHANOGLU ..... B Leverkusen & Turkey
Jose CALLEJON ..... Napoli & Spain
Ignacio CAMACHO ..... Malaga & Spain
Esteban CAMBIASSO ... Olympiakos & Argentina*
Emre CAN ..... Liverpool & Germany
Lorik CANA ..... Nantes & Albania*
Antonio CANDREVA ..... Lazio & Italy
P42 Facundo CARDOZO ..... Bolivar (loan Velez) & Arg*
Edinson CAVANI ..... PSG & Uruguay
Juan CAZARES ..... Atletico Mineiro & Ecuador*
Santi CAZORLA ..... Arsenal & Spain
Petr CECH ..... Arsenal & Czech Rep*
Jose Francisco CEVALLOS ..... LDU & Ecuador*
Charyl CHAPPUIS ..... Suphanburi & Thailand*
Sunil CHHETRI . Bengaluru (loan Mumbai) & Ind

Giorgio CHIELLINI ..... Juventus & Italy
Yassine CHIKHAOUI ..... Al Gharafa & Tunisia*
Vlad CHIRICHES ..... Napoli & Romania*
Alejandro CHUMACERO ..... Strongest & Bolivia*
Jasper CILLESSEN ..... Ajax & Holland
Viktor CLAESSON ..... Elfsborg & Sweden*
Kingsley COMAN ..... Bayern (loan Juve) & Fra
German CONTI ..... Colon & Argentina*
Ante CORIC ..... Dinamo Zagreb & Croatia
Angel CORREA ..... Atletico Madrid & Argentina
P44 Diego COSTA ..... Chelsea & Spain
Benoit COSTIL ..... Rennes & France*
Thibaut COURTOIS ..... Chelsea & Belgium
Philippe COUTINHO ..... Liverpool & Brazil
Adrian CUBAS ..... Boca Juniors & Argentina*
Moanes DABOUR ..... Grasshoppers & Israel
Mahmoud DAHOUD ..... Gladbach & Germany*
Jurgen DAMM ..... Tigres & Mexico
DANI ALVES ..... Barcelona & Brazil
DANILO Pereira ..... Porto & Portugal
Vladimir DARIDA ..... Hertha & Czech Rep*
DAVID LUIZ ..... PSG & Brazil
Steven DAVIS ..... Southampton & N Ireland*
Kevin DE BRUYNE .. Manchester City & Belgium
David DE GEA ..... Manchester United & Spain
Luuk DE JONG ..... PSV & Holland*
Daniele DE ROSSI ..... Roma & Italy
P46 Brecht DEJAEGERE ..... Gent & Belgium*
Nicolas DELGADILLO ..... Velez & Argentina*
Mattias DELGADO ..... Basle & Argentina*
Andy DELORT ..... Caen & France*
Clint DEMPSEY ..... Seattle Sounders & USA
Leander DENDONCKER .. Anderlecht & Belgium*
Memphis DEPAY ..... Man United & Holland
Laurent DEPOITRE ..... P49 ..... Gent & Belgium
Olivier DESCHACHT ..... Anderlecht & Belgium*
Angel DI MARIA ..... P50 ..... PSG & Argentina
Lassana DIARRA ..... Marseille & France*
Marcelo DIAZ ..... Celta Vigo & Chile
Mauro DIAZ ..... Dallas & Argentina*
Sergio DIAZ ..... Cerro Porteno & Paraguay*
Daniel DIDAVI ..... Stuttgart & Germany*
Famara DIEDHIOU . Clermont (loan Sochaux) & Sen*
DIOGO JOTA ..... Pacos Ferreira & Portugal*
P48 Nabil DIRAR ..... Monaco & Morocco*
Borek DOCKAL ..... Sparta & Czech Rep
Alejandro DOMINGUEZ ..... Olympiakos & Arg
Gianluigi DONNARUMMA ..... P52 ..... Milan & Italy*
Giovanni DOS SANTOS ..... LA Galaxy & Mexico
Jonathan DOS SANTOS ..... Villarreal & Mexico
Bas DOST ..... Wolfsburg & Holland
DOUGLAS COSTA ..... Bayern Munich & Brazil
Julian DRAXLER ..... Wolfsburg & Germany
Jimmy DURMAZ ..... Olympiakos & Sweden*
Paulo DYBALA ..... P54 ..... Juventus & Argentina
Balazs DZSUDZSAK ..... Bursaspor & Hungary*
Artyom DZYUBA ..... P57 ..... Zenit & Russia
EDER ..... Inter (loan Sampdoria) & Italy*
Mohamed ELNENY ..... Arsenal & Egypt
Breel EMBOLO ..... Basle & Switzerland
Vincent ENYEAMA ..... Lille & Nigeria
Christian ERIKSEN ..... Tottenham & Denmark
P50 Cristian ESPINOZA ..... Huracan & Argentina*
Jonny EVANS ..... West Brom & Northern Ireland*
Frank FABRA ..... Boca Juniors & Colombia*
Cesc FABREGAS ..... Chelsea & Spain
Diego FAGUNDEZ .. New England Rev & Uruguay*
Ralf FAHRMANN ..... Schalke & Germany*
Sofiane FEGHOULI ..... Valencia & Algeria
Nabil FEKIR ..... Lyon & France
FELIPE ANDERSON ..... Lazio & Brazil
FERNANDAO ..... Fenerbahce & Brazil*
Augusto FERNANDEZ ..... At Madrid & Argentina*
FERNANDINHO ..... Manchester City & Brazil
Roberto FIRMINO ..... Liverpool & Brazil
Alessandro FLORENZI ..... Roma & Italy*
P52 Diego FORLAN ..... Penarol & Uruguay*
Kostas FORTOUNIS ..... Olympiakos & Greece*
Manolo GABBIADINI ..... Napoli & Italy
GABI ..... Atletico Madrid & Spain
GABRIEL BARBOSA ..... Santos & Brazil*

GABRIEL JESUS ..... Palmeiras & Brazil*
Nico GAITAN ..... Benfica & Argentina
Kevin GAMEIRO ..... Sevilla & France*
Ezequiel GARAY ..... Zenit and Argentina
Shkelzen GASHI ..... Colorado Rapids & Albania
Valere GERMAIN ..... Nice (loan Monaco) & Fra*
Andre-Pierre GIGNAC .. P58 ..... Tigres & France
Jose GIMENEZ ..... At Madrid & Uruguay
Matthias GINTER ..... P60 Dortmund & Germany*
Sebastian GIOVINCO ..... Toronto & Italy
Olivier GIROUD ..... Arsenal & France
Diego GODIN ..... Atletico Madrid & Uruguay
Gokhan TORE ..... Besiktas & Turkey*
Andre GOMES ..... Valencia & Portugal*
P54 Maxime GONALONS ..... Lyon & France
Goncalo GUEDES ..... Benfica & Portugal*
Cesar GONZALEZ ..... Dep Tachira & Venezuela*
Mark GONZALEZ ..... Sport & Chile
Mario GOTZE ..... Bayern Munich & Germany
Ricardo GOULART ..... Guangzhou Ev & Brazil
Andreas GRANQVIST ..... Krasnodar & Sweden*
Antoine GRIEZMANN ..... At Madrid & France
Andres GUARDADO ..... PSV & Mexico
Nemanja GUDELJ ..... Ajax & Serbia
Paulo GUERRERO ..... P62 ..... Flamengo & Peru*
John GUIDETTI ..... Celta & Sweden*
Ilkay GUNDOGAN ... Bor Dortmund & Germany
Gaston GURUCEAGA ..... Penarol & Uruguay*
Asamoah GYAN ..... Shanghai SIPG & Ghana
Sebastien HALLER ..... Utrecht & France*
Marek HAMSIK ..... Napoli & Slovakia
Samir HANDANOVIC ..... Inter & Slovenia
P56 Martin HANSEN ..... Den Haag & Denmark*
Jack HARRISON ..... New York City & England*
Joe HART ..... Manchester City & England
Eden HAZARD ..... Chelsea & Belgium
Jonas HECTOR ..... Cologne & Germany*
Markus HENRIKSEN ..... AZ & Norway*
Angelo HENRIQUEZ ..... Dinamo Zagreb & Chile*
Javier HERNANDEZ ..... B Leverkusen & Mexico*
Hector HERRERA ..... Porto & Mexico
Gonzalo HIGUAIN ..... P64 ..... Napoli & Argentina
Martin HINTEREGGER . Gladbach (loan Salzburg) & Aut*
Pierre HOJBJERG Augsburg (loan Schalke) & Den
Keisuke HONDA ..... Milan & Japan
HULK ..... Zenit & Brazil
Mats HUMMELS ..... Dortmund & Germany
Khalfan IBRAHIM ..... Al Sadd & Qatar
Zlatan IBRAHIMOVIC ..... PSG & Sweden
P58 Mauro ICARDI ..... Internazionale & Argentina
Odion IGHALO ..... Watford & Nigeria*
Josip ILICIC ..... Fiorentina & Slovenia*
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The secret behind Leicester: freaks with a simple system

Premier League upstarts rely on doing what they are good at, says Jonathan Wilson

When Leicester City beat Manchester City 3-1 in February – and made everybody wake up to the fact they might actually be serious title contenders after all – they had 36.1 per cent possession and their pass completion rate was just 64 per cent.

Previously there had been a consensus of opinion, informed by the success of Barcelona under Pep Guardiola, that possession was key. Johan Cruyff kept telling everybody that if you have the ball, the opposition can't score. Dominate possession; pass, pass, pass; grind the opposition down with the attrition of constant movement and exploit the spaces when they occurred. It was what the best teams did, celebrating their mastery by hogging the ball. Football, it seemed, had moved into a new phase.

Ever since the 6-3 defeat to Hungary in 1953 – England's first defeat at home to non-British or Irish opposition – there has been a tendency to blame failure on, initially, a lack of passion and desire, and then, in a more considered way, a lack of technique.

English players, columnists and coaches agree, aren't good enough on the ball, don't practise technique enough early in life, play on pitches that are too big, and prioritise pace and stamina.

> Leicester have the third-lowest possession stats in the Premier League and the lowest pass success rate of any team in Europe's top five leagues

The cry went up after the 3-1 beating by West Germany in 1972, after the 2-0 loss to Holland in 1977, after the embarrassments of the early 1990s and Euro 2000, after the 3-2 defeat to Croatia in 2007. But while this may have some basis in fact, it doesn't explain how England, with such supposedly inferior technique, were able to win the World Cup in 1966. Or why English sides were able to dominate European competition in the 1970s and the 1980s. Or why two English clubs were able to contest the Champions League Final in 2008 – a game that, for all the influx of foreign players, kicked off with 10 Englishmen on the pitch.

The truth may simply be that there are many ways of playing football and that, when things go wrong, all countries have a tendency to believe they should adopt the qualities of their vanquishers. Brazil, for example, was obsessed throughout the 1970s and 1980s by the notion that its football needed to be more physical – something it has achieved with dismal results.

After Barcelona's thesis of radical possession came Jose Mourinho's antithesis of radical non-possession, exemplified by Internazionale's 1-0 defeat and 3-2 aggregate win with 19 per cent possession at Camp Nou in the Champions League semi-final in 2010. What European football is seeing now is the synthesis, a consensus based on hard-pressing and rapid transitions. Even Barcelona have begun to counter-attack more.

Pressure...Leicester give Manchester United's Anthony Martial little space

Target man... Marouane Fellaini

Leicester, as perhaps is fitting for a smaller club, lie at the radical end of that.

There has been much talk in the Premier League of the rise of the middle, how the incredible wealth of the new television deals means that being inordinately rich, in the way of Roman Abramovich or Sheikh Mansour are, is no longer the advantage it once was.

Leicester's average possession this season has been 43.7 per cent: the third-lowest figure in the Premier League. Their pass success rate is 69.3 per cent – which is not merely the lowest in the Premier League but the fifth-lowest of any team in the top tier of any of Europe's major five leagues.

Leicester's pass completion rate is low not because of any technical failing, rather because of the way they play: the much-circulated rat-a-tat of passes in the

Impressive...Riyad Mahrez celebrates scoring Leicester's second goal at Manchester City

win over Liverpool is proof of that. Their game plan is relatively simple. They sit deep and look to draw the opposition on. The two central midfielders, N'Golo Kante and Danny Drinkwater, shield the back four. The two wide midfielders, Riyad Mahrez and Marc Albrighton, drop back when required to form the classic two banks of four, and the second striker, Shinji Okazaki, falls back to add an additional man when necessary.

When they get the ball, they spring forward at pace. Sometimes that involves running with the ball, as Kante and Mahrez did so thrillingly for the second goal against City, but more commonly it means hitting quick passes towards Jamie Vardy, who is not merely rapid but has become increasingly intelligent in his movement over the past couple of seasons. Those passes offer high reward – Vardy either being set clean through against the goalkeeper or getting a run at a defender – but they also risk losing possession. The point is that it's a risk worth taking.

There's perhaps a broader lesson here: just because it's simple doesn't mean it can't be effective. Jurgen Klopp mentioned after Liverpool's league defeat to West Ham United in January that his defence couldn't handle Andy Carroll and suggested his side could have achieved something similar by focusing on crossing to Christian Benteke. He's trying, of course, to shape the club to his philosophy but it did rather raise the question, why not? Many Manchester United fans, similarly, seem to feel a little uneasy about the tactic of long diagonals towards Marouane Fellaini, as though such a tactic doesn't quite befit a club of their stature.

Leicester's rise is slightly freakish, an extremely rare coincidence of almost an entire team hitting the form of their lives simultaneously. And they have benefited from the fact that big sides seem not to have taken them seriously enough to make real efforts to counter their strengths. But they also offer hope to smaller teams, showing that having big-name players on big wages isn't the only way to prosper.

Sometimes, having decent players working to a system that gets the best out of them, that makes them greater than the sum of their parts, can be enough. WS

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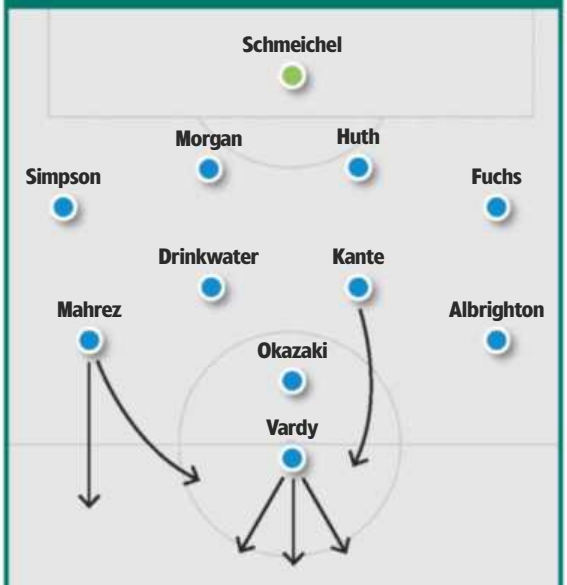


Game plan...Leicester sit deep before counter-attacking

Facetoface

BOB BRADLEY

"I've accepted challenges to prove myself"

One of the few American coaches in Europe, the 57-year-old hopes to take Le Havre into Ligue 1

You were so close to taking Egypt to the 2014 World Cup. Do you still think about what might have been?
Well, the experience in Egypt was still incredible in all ways. The idea that we could win seven out of eight World Cup qualifiers and not get there...the disappointment of getting so close. The terrible loss in Kumasi [a 6-1 defeat away to Ghana]. These are things that stick with you forever.

Do you still speak to the Egyptian players?
The experience with those players during that historic period; the idea that we came together and all tried to find a way to find something special for the country during that time. When you share this, no one can take that away. I still stay in touch with Aboutrika, Hossam Ghaly, Mohamed Salah, El Neny, Hegazi. And my friends. I love Egypt, I love the people and I am proud of what we did there. I'll forever be disappointed we didn't make it to Brazil.

Your next job was very different, taking over at Norwegian club Stabaek...
It is a small club. I said it a million times: it is a small club with a big heart. There were a group of people who had an idea to take the club from the third or fourth league and they did it. But the club hit hard days financially, hit rock bottom. When I went to visit, what I loved was that most of the original group was there. They stayed strong.

It is probably as far away from the pressure-cooker atmosphere of revolution and African football that you could possibly get...
It was a team that surprised everyone in Norway. The first season, everyone said we would go down. We finished mid table and made the semi-finals of the cup. We lost many of those players, yet in the second year we picked up some exciting attacking players. Adama Diomande scored 17 goals in 22 games. If you have that success someone notices, and Hull snapped him up and it hurt our final run to compete with Rosenborg. But we finished third and made Europa League qualification. It was a team and a club you could really be proud of. Every week, on the website we had "Bob's Corner". I'd speak for one to three minutes, unscripted about whatever was on my mind. Mostly football, but also other interesting things. I started throwing in some music. It started in the locker room. The players were blasting their music. And I asked who picks the music. Have you heard of Springsteen, U2, The Who, Tom Waits or Creedence Clearwater Revival? I played David Bowie's *Heroes*. None of them knew it. I thought, "what world are you living in!" So for my final "Bob's Corner" I talked about a Springsteen song, *The Ties That Bind*. I used to speak to the players about the ties that bind. In life, when you work with people, when you get to know people, when you are in something together you cannot break the ties that bind. I have been to more than 50 Springsteen shows...

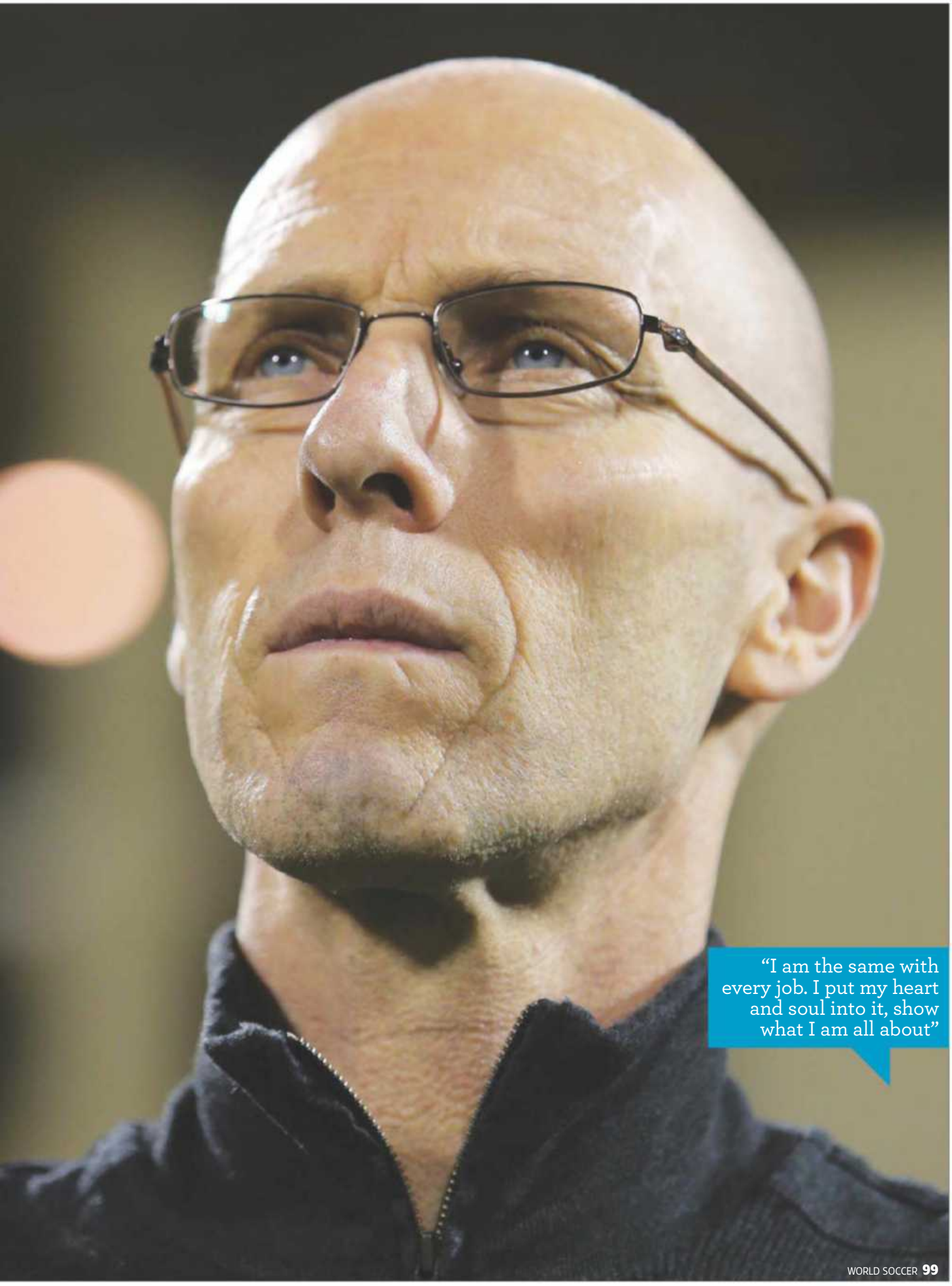
Did you not think about staying?
There was discussions about staying, but it was a two-year project. I could feel good leaving things at that point and see if there was a good challenge. Everyone knows my name gets mentioned time to time with the bigger leagues. But it has never led to a bigger team in a bigger league.

Why do you think that is?
I don't know, I'm tired of answering that. In England, they talk about Premier League experience. That is fair. I don't have it. In all countries there are very good candidates. There are some very good coaches. But a lot of coaches, I think, are not great and get jobs over and over. When the decision-makers look over things you don't know how they make decisions. But I am the same with every job. I put my heart and soul into it, show what I am all about. If someone takes the time to get to know me it might fit with a project. If they don't think that, you keep working and hope someone, somewhere along the line, works it out. There was nothing in the Premier League but there was interest in Le Havre, which is owned by [American businessman] Vincent Volpe. All the years he has lived here he felt strongly the club was important to the city, as a socio-economic project. I felt it was an exciting project.

You are very much in contention for promotion to Ligue 1. How have you been coping with the language barrier?
When you work through football details it is more important to establish a mission, an identity and purpose. When you walk on the pitch, what are we all about? We are trying to make sure that within our group the identity is a group of guys that has a special connection and passion for the club and the game and the challenge. The coaches that were here would always talk about the French mentality being different. I would listen and ask myself "what does that mean?" In every place I have worked, every place, I don't come with the answers. I listen and observe. I'm trying to figure that out every day.

There haven't been many American coaches in Europe. How have you been received in France?
When I've arrived here in the city, when I walk around, it's positive. The results so far have been alright. But everyone in Le Havre dreams of Ligue 1. I'm getting to know them, they are getting to know me. The connection between the team and city, the players and fans, this is what counts the most. I spoke to some of the players and supporters and they said I should move to Honfleur, where Monet used to live. It is a beautiful town. But I told the supporters, to coach L'HAC you have to live in the city and need to feel everyday the spirit of the people and see if you can try to make a connection. To coach the Egyptian national team you needed to understand the people and their culture. You wouldn't figure it out living in a gated community. It was important to live in Cairo. The team represents the city.

Have you missed the international game ➤



"I am the same with every job. I put my heart and soul into it, show what I am all about"

Hopeful...promotion-chasing Le Havre

and do you miss home?
After I finished Egypt, I've always considered myself a club coach. I love the day-to-day approach. You see the players every day. Sure, I miss my family. When I talk about the "ties that bind" in the football context, it is the experiences that you share. But it is a song we have always felt strongly about it in our family. You need a strong connection. We might not always be together but the closeness of the family will never go away.

Do you still believe that the big job, maybe in the Premier League, will happen?
I always believed in the work, my ability to lead. To make them play as a team. I've accepted challenges to prove myself. When I was in Egypt, after Port Said [where 72 fans of Al Ahly were killed after a league match] people asked why I didn't leave. Then I went to Norway, to this small team and people would ask why come here. At the end of it, what it amounts to is this part of you on the inside you want to show people what you can do, you want to prove yourself, you want a chance. That part has never diminished. Maybe someone will notice. Down the road I might get a chance. You can look at any sport. I went to college with [basketball coach] Dave Blatt. He wasn't good enough to play in the NBA but played in Israel and coached in Europe. And he was successful in Israel, Italy, Russia. During that time he didn't get opportunities at the NBA. He was on the outside looking in. But his reputation was growing and he gets hired for the Cleveland Cavaliers. Obviously they lost [the 2015 NBA Final] but he got his chance because someone recognised his work.

The USA national side had a great 2014 World Cup and the game is booming in the States. Are you surprised?
I'm not surprised. I think people outside think it has happened overnight; in reality it is the result of efforts for so many people on so many different levels. It has taken hold, it has roots. Go back to 1994 and every World Cup has got more people excited. But also the start of the MLS in 1996 and the push for the league to get bigger. The way the league went after some of the big US players to get them back. They've gone out and brought some big international talents. It has been a great effort. But whether you are a club or a national team, you can't ever think you've made it.

Example...Cleveland Cavaliers coach Dave Blatt

One of your former players, Egyptian international Mohamed El Neny recently signed for Arsenal from Swiss club Basle. Do you think he will be a success in the Premier League?
I'm really excited for Neny, proud of him. The one guy that doesn't get mentioned enough when I went to Egypt was Dia El Sayed. He was coach of the under-20s in 2011. He brought through Salah, Neny, Hegazi. I still call him my brother. He was like a father to these guys. After Port Said we didn't have a league so that was our chance to look at the young players. He had done an incredible job, how quickly Salah, Neny and Hegazi developed. I remember a meeting with some Basle people. I told them that Neny will continue to grow. Basle took him and he did grow in a great way. And to see this young kid from [the Egyptian city of] Mahalla have the chance at Arsenal is incredible.

Finally, back to Le Havre. Is it essential to get promotion this season?
That's the goal. When I spoke to Mr Volpe and spend time in the city, the aim is Ligue 1. From a coaching standpoint you need points and results, you need to become a better team. That is the part I focus on. But I don't lose sight of the end result.

Interview by James Montague

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World Soccer vintage 28 years ago

March 1988

Each month we look back at the talking points of the decades

As the UEFA club competitions approached the business end of the season, one team taking the continent by storm were PSV. Guus Hiddink's side were strolling towards the Dutch title after recording 17 consecutive wins from the start of the season and were due to meet Bordeaux in the quarter-finals of the European Cup.

Jim Holden reported on two Danish players, in the twilight of their careers, who were playing a major role in shaping PSV's season.

"It is entirely fitting that Frank Arnesen and Soren Lerby, brothers in boots, should be finishing their careers as they begun them, together," he wrote.

"Fifteen years ago, Arnesen and Lerby were rough and ready teenagers with Copenhagen club Fremad Amager, full of enthusiasm and natural ability. Lerby, indeed, needed only 12 first-team matches to convince Ajax, then European champions in the era of Cruyff the player, to take him along with Arnesen on professional terms.

"Arnesen was 17, Lerby 16, when they packed their boots for football fame and fortune overseas."

> **"We never have to talk to each other during a game. It's as if we can read each other's minds"**
>
> Frank Arnesen on his PSV and Denmark team-mate Soren Lerby

Arnesen spent six years in Amsterdam, before joining Valencia in 1981 and later moving on to Anderlecht. Lerby stayed another year before Bayern Munich came calling. The pair were reunited at PSV, with Arnesen arriving in November 1985

SIX

WORLD SOCCER, MARCH 1988

BROTHERS IN BOOTS

PSV EINDHOVEN are running away with the Dutch championship. They won a record 17 matches from the start of the season and then they triumphed 1-0, despite a hail of missiles from the Amsterdam crowd, away to Ajax in a vital league match against their only title contenders. Now they have their sights set on the Champions' Cup. But PSV represent more than Dutch football. Two of their star names are Danes: SOREN LERBY and FRANK ARNESEN.

Feature by JIM HOLDEN

IT is entirely fitting that Frank Arnesen and Soren Lerby, brothers-in-boots, should be finishing their careers as they begun them together.

Both are now members of the talented PSV Eindhoven team racing away at the top of the Dutch league and which many feel is a good each-way bet to win the European Cup this season.

Both say they want to quit in two years' time having won a major European honour.

Fifteen years ago Arnesen and Lerby were rough and ready teenagers with Copenhagen club Fremad Amager, full of enthusiasm and natural ability. Lerby, indeed, needed only 12 first team matches to convince Ajax Amsterdam, then European champions in the era of Cruyff the player, to take him along with Arnesen on professional terms.

Ajax

Arnesen was 17, Lerby 16, when they packed their boots for football fame and fortune overseas. Both became integral members of the Dutch national side while with Ajax, but it was a time when the club always came before country. Denmark still struggled to translate talents spread across Europe into a cohesive national team.

By the time Sepp Piontek became Danish manager in 1979 UEFA rules were beginning to help national sides. And by then Arnesen and Lerby were on the European transfer merry-go-round. Arnesen travelled via Valencia and Anderlecht to PSV, while Lerby's route took in Bayern Munich and Monaco.

In the intervening years their paths crossed with the emergence of the national team as a global force.

Lerby says: "It was all down to Piontek really. He started us played in the contra style and after a few years we began to improve. We were also lucky because we had a number of good players together at the same time. Obviously Frank was one of them.

"We have always played well together, and that perhaps helped with the national team even though we were with different clubs."

Special

Arnesen says: "Soren and I have always had a special something on the pitch even though we are very different as players and people. We never have to talk to each other during a game. It's as if we can read each other's minds."

Arnesen says: "Soren and I have always had a special something on the pitch even though we are very different as players and people. We never have to talk to each other during a game. It's as if we can read each other's minds."

They complement each other. Lerby defensive by nature whereas Arnesen plays a more attacking role, scavenging down the wings. His drive has become one of the most crucial factors in Denmark's glory years, particularly when you consider the horrendous injuries he has suffered.

A knee injury at Valencia kept Arnesen out of football for two years, but he said: "I wanted to try to come back and play in major tournament finals. It was a long time to be out, but I enjoy the game more now because I know what I missed.

"Now I'm like a little child running about in my enthusiasm, but the time out also gave me a respect for the game."

Arnesen's enthusiasm sometimes lets his fiery temperament get the better of him. He was sent off against West Germany in the World Cup finals in Mexico and missed the 5-1 defeat against Spain which saw Denmark eliminated. It was significant, because Arnesenen provides the drive to lift team-mates if or when things go wrong.

Lerby is more cultured even getting into Eric Batty's World XI. He is the epitome of the modern European star; always in control on the ball, precise, in the pass, and with an eye for goal.

Memory

My abiding memory of him will be a June day in 1985 when he helped Denmark beat the Soviet Union 4-2 in a World Cup qualifier in the afternoon. After the final whistle he didn't even have time to change out of his kit before being whisked away in a helicopter en route to Munich and playing for Bayern the same night as they won the German title.

The jet-set footballer had come a long way from his roots in working class Copenhagen.

Now he and Arnesen are together again in the little Denmark that is PSV Eindhoven, where national team stars Ivan Nielsen and Jan Heintze are also club colleagues.

Little luck

Lerby says: "We have a good squad who are all international players and we do have a chance of winning the European Cup with a little luck that you need. And if it's not this year it could be the next. I want to play for two more years and winning it would be a great way to finish."

Arnesen also wants to play for two more years, and even if he doesn't get that medal, he will always have memories to share with his good friend and colleague Soren Lerby.

Considering the way PSV charged victorious, through their record-breaking first 17 games of the Dutch season, few could happily bet against them in Europe.

SOREN LERBY... wants to go out as a winner.

Cultured...Soren Lerby in the 1988 European Cup Final

and Lerby following from Monaco in 1987.

Holden continued: "Arnesen says: 'Soren and I have always had a special something on the pitch even though we are very different as players and people. We never have to talk to each other during a game. It's as if we can read each other's minds.'

"They complement each other, Lerby defensive by nature whereas Arnesen plays a more attacking role, scavenging down the wings.

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"Lerby is more cultured. He is the epitome of the modern European star; always in control on the ball, precise in the pass, and with an eye for a goal.

"Now he and Arnesen are together again in the little Denmark that is PSV, where national team stars Ivan Neilsen and Jan Heintze are also club colleagues.

"Lerby says: 'We've a good squad who are all international players and we have a chance of winning the European Cup."

And that's exactly what they did, getting past Bordeaux and then Real Madrid before beating Benfica in the Final. WS

Also in this issue...

p8-9 Following a training ground bust-up with Ajax coach Johan Cruyff several months earlier, "Frank Rijkaard is, at last, coming back in from the cold," wrote Simon Kuper. "After months of uncertainty, he has signed for Sporting Lisbon and can at last train again with team-mates instead of on his own at Dutch federation headquarters at Zeist."

p10-11 Duncan Shaw reported on the exploits of an unfancied club who were making a name for themselves in Europe, explaining: "Espanyol's progress in the UEFA Cup has been little short of sensational. The first to be humbled by the little-known men, splendidly coached by the aggressive young Javier Clemente, were Borussia Monchengladbach." After winning 5-1 on aggregate, "the Spaniards turned the same trick in the second round against Milan – Gullit, Van Basten et al." Following a 2-0 aggregate win, "it was back to Italy to face an Inter team packed with ageing heroes." A further 2-1 aggregate win, set up a quarter-final showdown with Vitkovice of Czechoslovakia.

p14-15 In a six-page special on the forthcoming African Nations Cup in Morocco, Mark Gleeson noted of the hosts: "The North Africans, who were surprisingly knocked out of the Olympic Games qualifiers by Tunisia in late January, face some formidable opposition from holders Egypt, neighbours Algeria and charismatic Cameroon, but home advantage gives them the edge over the seven other finalists."

p32-33 Brian Clough, who had been turned down for the England manager's job on more than one occasion in the past, had his latest hopes of international management dashed. Derick Allsop gave his opinion on the situation, commenting: "For a long time, it has been obvious that Brian Clough would never be manager of England. Now it seems, the consolation prize of one of the other home country managements is barred as well, following Nottingham Forest's refusal to allow him a few days off every now and again to manage Wales."

RIJKAARD COMES IN FROM COLD

ESPANOL THE SHOCK TEAM

HOS' NATION FAVOURITES FOR TROPHY

10 years ago

In the inaugural A-League season, Dwight Yorke captained Sydney to a Grand Final victory over Central Coast Mariners. Steve Corica scored the winning goal for the team coached by former West German World Cup winner Pierre Littbarski.

20 years ago

A Bordeaux side featuring Zinedine Zidane overturned a 2-0 first-leg deficit to beat Milan 3-2 on aggregate in the UEFA Cup quarter-finals. Didier Tholot scored an early goal for the French club before Christophe Dugarry added two more in the space of six second-half minutes.

30 years ago

Welsh coach Mike Smith led Egypt to the African Nations title in front of 95,000 fans in Cairo. They beat Cameroon 5-4 on penalties in the Final after a 0-0 draw to secure their third continental championship. Cameroon's Roger Milla scored in every game apart from the Final.

40 years ago

In English football, Queens Park Rangers, who were unbeaten since January, led the league by a point with five games remaining, while third-tier Crystal Palace, managed by Malcolm Allison, beat Sunderland 1-0 away to reach the FA Cup semi-finals.

50 years ago

A dog called Pickles found the World Cup trophy after it had been stolen while on display at a stamp exhibition at Westminster Central Hall in London, just months before the start of the 1966 tournament in England. The trophy was discovered in a hedgerow in south London.

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Hit man...Napoli's Gonzalo Higuain leads the chart

HUNGARY

In their first major tournament since 1986

OVERVIEW

Hungary qualified for their first major tournament since the 1986 World Cup by beating Norway in the play-offs with a gutsy, well-organised performance.

- Hungary changed coaches three times in the course of the qualifying campaign. Attila Pinter was sacked in September 2015 after a poor start (a home defeat by Northern Ireland). He was replaced by Pal Dardai, coach of Hertha Berlin's youth team. Dardai made steady progress, drawing away to local rivals Romania, but when he was made Hertha's first-team coach, the club would not let him continue and Bernd Storck stepped in.
- Norway were technically superior in the play-offs but Hungary defended heroically and scored goals from unlikely sources: debutant Laszlo Kleinheisler and Tamas Priskin in his first game for 14 months.
- Most of the squad play in the domestic league, with only Dzsudzsak (Turkey) and Kleinheisler, Stieber, Szalai (Germany) playing outside Eastern Europe.

Scramble...keeper Gabor Kiraly thwarts Norway

TACTICS

Storck could stick with play-off heroes Kleinheisler and Priskin in his defence-minded 4-5-1 formation, but Zoltan Stieber and Adam Szalai are alternatives if they can get more action with their clubs. Veteran Zoltan Gera still pulls the strings in midfield.

STAR MAN

Balazs DZSUDZSAK

Winger (profiled below) is easily Hungary's most high-profile player.

COACH

Bernd STORCK

German, a former national coach of Kazakhstan. Stepped up from technical director role last year.

PLAYER PROFILE

Catch me if you can...Hungary will look to Dzsudzsak's mesmerising skills in France

BALAZS DZSUDZSAK

About to spearhead Hungary's first international tournament for three decades, their skipper and wide man will have an awful lot on his shoulders.

By common consent the team's only genuine top-notch player, 29-year-old Dzsudzsak's wonderfully expressive play and ability on the break are the heart and soul of the side's creative operation. His beautifully struck free-kick against Romania in the qualifiers showed he can match the best for dead-ball potency.

His quick feet and vivid imagination are not his only means of influence. After a spell of celebrity overload, fast cars and gossip columns, he has matured of late into a highly effective leader; both a proud keeper of the cherry red tradition – see his floods of tears on qualification – and a steadying influence on the squad's younger members, such as Adam Nagy, Laszlo Kleinheiser and Zsolt Kalmar.

Somewhat out of sight and out of mind since quitting PSV in 2011 for a spot of intrepid backpacking – four Russian league campaigns with Anzhi and Dynamo Moscow, then a move to Bursaspor in Turkey last year – Euro 2016 could not have come at a better time. A strong tournament and he will be infinitely more marketable.

Nick Bidwell

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Master motivator O'Neill oversaw a play-off win over Bosnia

OVERVIEW

The traditional qualities of hard work and team spirit have taken the Republic to their second successive Euro finals.

- The Republic qualified for their second successive European finals after beating Bosnia in the play-offs. On paper, Bosnia had plenty of stars (Dzeko, Pjanic) but Irish spirit and organisation proved decisive: a classic case of being greater than the sum of their parts.
- They enjoyed a bright start to the qualifying campaign, with wins over Georgia and Gibraltar and a 1-1 draw with world champions Germany. But a home draw with Scotland stalled the campaign in a tough group where Germany and Poland came out on top.
- Victory in Dublin over Germany boosted hopes of automatic qualification, but defeat to Poland in their final game pushed them into the play-offs.
- O'Neill's biggest strength is as a motivator, with the volatile Roy Keane as his assistant.
- All the squad is based in England, with the exception of Robbie Keane.

Joyous...after the play-off second leg in Dublin

TACTICS

O'Neill has some difficult decisions on whether to stick with the play-off heroes or go back to veterans such as Shay Given, John O'Shea and Robbie Keane. Robbie Brady can play in defence or midfield, while Wes Hoolahan can play anywhere across midfield.

STAR MAN

Robbie KEANE

The Republic's record goalscorer has extended his career at Los Angeles Galaxy.

COACH

Martin O'NEILL

The former Leicester City, Celtic and Aston Villa boss took over in November 2013. Assisted by Roy Keane.

PLAYER PROFILE

Stand and deliver...Long can come up with priceless goals, like his winner in the Euro 2016 qualifier against Germany

SHANE LONG

For a player who only started three of the Republic of Ireland's games on the road to France 2016 and who very rarely completes a full 90 minutes of competitive football for his country – just once in the past five years – Shane Long remains a remarkably important figure in coach Martin O'Neill's plans.

Indeed, without his outstanding work as a goalscoring substitute – witness his late equaliser in the 1-1 home draw with Poland and sensational winner against Germany in Dublin last October – the Irish simply would not have qualified, those "extra" four points were crucial to the side's third-place finish in Group D and eventual play-off success.

Over the course of his seven seasons in the Premier League with Reading, West Bromwich Albion, Hull City and now Southampton, the 29-year-old all-action and aerially-dominant striker from Tipperary has received more than his share of unfavourable reviews, most of them accusing him of a poor first-touch and wastefulness in front of goal.

Yet does he truly deserve all this negativity? Fifty-nine caps for the Republic, £25.5million of combined transfer fees and millions of recommendations in the Emerald Isle suggest not.

Nick Bidwell

SWEDEN

Heading to France thanks to Zlatan's special moments

OVERVIEW

Zlatan Ibrahimovic holds the key to success in France after the Paris Saint-Germain striker inspired his fellow countrymen to victory over neighbours Denmark in the play-offs.

- Sweden are heading to France after a play-off victory over Scandinavian rivals Denmark. Zlatan Ibrahimovic proved to be the difference, scoring an acrobatic volley from a corner and a brilliant free-kick to see the Swedes through.
- In truth, Sweden were lucky to have the safety net of the play-offs after coming third in a relatively easy qualifying group. They dropped points with draws against Austria, Russia and Montenegro, while defeats to Russia and Austria last September left them playing catch-up for the automatic qualifying places.
- Erik Hamren's side have struggled in defence since the retirement of Olof Mellberg but there are positive signs, notably in the under-21 side who won last summer's European Championship.

Hopeful...Russia's back line is breached

TACTICS

A tightly organised outfit relies on the brilliance of Ibrahimovic, with a main striker – Marcus Berg or the improving John Guidetti – to unlock defences. In central defence, European Under-21 champions Filip Helander and Alexander Milosevic are pressing for selection.

STAR MAN

Zlatan IBRAHIMOVIC

One of Europe's leading players, the PSG forward has undoubted star quality.

COACH

Erik HAMREN

A league title-winner in Denmark and Norway, the dapper 58-year-old will stand down after Euro 2016.

PLAYER PROFILE

Irresistible force...Isaksson uses his 6ft 6in frame to good effect

ANDREAS ISAKSSON

As far as Swedish national goalkeepers are concerned, the preferred setting clearly is for extended play.

Ronnie Hellstrom reigned between the *Blagult* (blue and gold) posts for a decade and Thomas Ravelli for 16 long years, while the current wearer of the jersey Andreas Isaksson – third in his country's most-capped list with 127 – has been around since 2002 and at the age of 34 arguably is only just reaching his peak.

Voted Sweden's Goalkeeper of the Year on no fewer than 10 occasions, the 34-year-old already has appeared in three European Championships and two World Cup finals, but up to now he has enjoyed relatively little big tournament success, only once making it to the last eight: the penalty shoot-out defeat by Holland in the quarter-finals of Euro 2004.

Composed, commanding, steady and adept at using every inch of his 6ft 6in frame, Isaksson also brings considerable continental club experience to bear, having played in the top flights of Italy (Juventus), Sweden (Trelleborg and Djurgarden), France (Rennes), England (Manchester City) and now Turkey with Kasimpasa.

Nick Bidwell

UKRAINE

Euro 2012 co-hosts made it through the play-offs

OVERVIEW

Ukraine put their domestic troubles behind them to beat Slovenia in the play-offs, with wingers Yarmolenko and Konoplyanka leading the way.

- Ukraine have qualified for only their second major finals. Their previous tournament qualification was for the 2006 World Cup, when Andriy Shevchenko inspired the team to the quarter-finals.
- They were co-hosts with Poland in 2012 but losses to England and France resulted in elimination at the group stage.
- Won the Euro 2016 play-off against Slovenia after finishing third behind Spain and Slovakia in their group.
- They suffered an early setback in qualifying, losing at home to Slovakia in their opening game.
- The current side lacks star quality, although Yevhen Konoplyanka has made the switch to Spain and Andriy Yarmolenko could follow suit.
- The civil war has had a major impact on the domestic league but Dnipro reached last year's Europa League Final with a strict defensive approach.

Defiant...keeper Andriy Pyatov keeps out Slovenia

TACTICS

Fomenko has plenty of experience in the spine of the team, while their biggest attacking threat comes from the flanks in the form of wingers Andriy Yarmolenko and Yevhen Konoplyanka. Roman Zozulya is an alternative to Yevhen Seleznyov in the lone striker role.

STAR MAN

Andriy YARMOLENKO

Winger who has been the star for Dynamo Kiev and has long been linked with a move to western Europe.

COACH

Mykhaylo FOMENKO

The 67-year-old veteran has been in charge since 2012 following the resignation of Oleh Blokhin.

PLAYER PROFILE

Late developer...there is much more to Seleznyov's game now than pure penalty-area predator

YEVHEN SELEZNYOV

The indestructible Dnipro striker is the unsung hero of the Ukraine attack. While five-star wingers Andriy Yarmolenko and Yevhen Konoplyanka provide the flair, zap and star quality, Seleznyov does an excellent job as the workhorse through the middle, the perfect counterpoint to the velvety skills out wide.

Renowned for his physical presence, relentless work-rate and never-say-die spirit, the 30-year-old, who graduated from the Shakhtar Donetsk academy, not only is a competitive beast, but in the last season or two has improved considerably as a footballer. He has transformed himself from pure penalty-box loiterer to mobile frontrunner, one much more likely to come deep and join the link-up party.

A UEFA Cup winner with Shakhtar Donetsk in 2008-09 and a Europa League runner-up with Dnipro last season, Seleznyov is in the form of his life at the moment, rattling in the goals for his club and on the score-sheet in the first-leg victory over Slovenia in the Euro 2016 play-offs.

After spending all of the 2012 European Championship on the bench, no one in the Ukraine camp will be hungrier this summer.

Nick Bidwell

USA

PAUL GARDNER

Tales of the unexpected

MLS gets ready for new season

If expecting the unexpected means excitement, then quite definitely Major League Soccer has to be one of the more exciting football leagues in the world.

The 2015 season, for instance, ushered in Portland Timbers as champions – a team who were surely not on anyone's likely list. Playing only their fifth season in the league, Timbers were coming off a poor 2014 in which they failed to make the play-offs. And it wasn't until half way through the 2015 campaign that Timbers, under their young American coach Caleb Porter, arriving straight from college soccer, started to mow down their opponents.

Part of the early problem had been an injury to key Argentinian midfielder Diego Valeri. Once he regained fitness, Timbers swept through to the Final and a 2-1 win over Columbus Crew. Unexpected yes, but certainly deserved.

Glamour was on the MLS menu in 2015, with two new clubs, New York City FC, and Orlando City SC. Expansion teams are not supposed to do well for a year or two – and both duly failed to make the play-offs – but this was not seen as a major tragedy, mostly because both were drawing big crowds, with season averages of 29,016 in New York and 32,847 in Orlando.

But the NYC owners – the Sheikhs who also own Manchester City – reacted sharply and fired the coach, Jason Kreis. It looked like a hurried, almost panic, move. Kreis left quietly, but many observers, remembering his astute player signings during his days as coach of Real Salt Lake, found it impossible to believe that he had been responsible for bringing in some of the truly poor players fielded by the club.

In his place came Patrick Vieira, whose appointment carried with it a suggestion that the job is an apprenticeship, training for a future appointment with Manchester City.

NYC's most important signing, David Villa, had a good season, scoring 18 goals for a weak team. His opposite number for Orlando, Kaka, also sparkled, with 10 goals and seven assists. The two joined forces in mid-season and proved a sprightly duo, playing for the MLS All Star team that beat Tottenham Hotspur 2-1. Kaka scored one goal and assisted Villa for the other.

Beating international opposition is always welcome news to MLS biggies, among whom commissioner Don Garber repeatedly assures everyone that it will be one of the world's major leagues by 2022. There are plenty of encouraging signs to support that positive thinking; from the building of new stadiums to new attendance records and television contracts, to the continued arrival of star players.

> "I don't think many would argue the American player isn't getting better"
> MLS Commissioner Don Garber

However, that last fact remains something of a double-edged sword because the vast majority of the famous arrivals are at the end of their careers and the last thing MLS wants is to be known as is an elephant's graveyard.

Sometimes the "elephants" showed they were far from over the hill, with Robbie Keane still scoring goals for LA Galaxy (94 in 141 games since arriving as a 30-year-old in 2011). Representing a more positive approach was Toronto's signing of Italian striker Sebastian Giovinco, in his prime at 28. With 22 goals – many of them in the spectacular class – Giovinco was the league's top scorer. He also won both the Newcomer of the Year and the Most Valuable Player awards. In addition, his signing got the league's seal of approval as the Best Transaction of the year.

The best transaction for 2016 may already have happened, with Seattle Sounders securing Jordan Morris (see page 76). It seemed likely that Morris – at 20, widely considered to be the most promising young American player – would, after just two years at Stanford University, join a European club. But following a trial with Germany's Werder Bremen, who were keen to sign him, Morris returned to the USA to join Seattle, the club with which he has grown up. Seattle's part of the deal was a $225,000 annual salary: the largest ever offered by an MLS club to a home-grown player.

Whether the deal with Morris marks a new era for MLS, in which its clubs will be willing to pay big money to sign young Americans, seems unlikely. While Morris was opting for Seattle, another American youngster, 17-year-old Christian Pulisic, was breaking into the Borussia Dortmund first team.

Any move towards signing young domestic players certainly does not seem to be part of coach Bruce ➤

Fireworks... Orlando City put on a show for New York City's visit

Veteran...Jelle Van Damme (in white) has joined the brigade of thirtysomethings at LA Galaxy

Arena's plans for Los Angeles Galaxy. Arena has sold the 27-year-old American international Omar Gonzalez to Pachuca in Mexico, while bringing in four Europeans: England's Steven Gerrard (age 35) and Ashley Cole (35), Belgium's Jelle Van Damme (32), and Dutch midfielder Nigel De Jong (31), plus a combative American midfielder in Jeff Larentowicz (32). De Jong's name has not been well received. On top of his well established reputation as a violent player, he is well remembered by US fans as the player who broke the leg of Stuart Holden, a popular young American now retired – the broken leg was a factor – and working as a TV analyst.

While NYC FC struggled in 2015, Red Bulls – their rivals in New Jersey across the Hudson River – were having an exceptional season under new coach Jesse Marsch. While their high-pressure game was not scintillating, the results were mostly in the win column. Red Bulls won the league's Supporters' Shield for the team with the most points in the regular season and by the time the play-offs came around, they found themselves in the unprecedented position of favourites to take the MLS title. The dreams came unstuck with a semi-final loss to Columbus, but the Bulls management, evidently satisfied with Marsch's system of play, have made few changes for 2016 and Bulls continue to be a club that spends cautiously.

The one big move was the transfer of young American defender Matt Miazga to Chelsea for a reported $5million – really an enforced change, as Miazga would be a free agent at the end of the MLS 2016 season.

Another surprising move came in Denver where Colorado Rapids, never known as a team that makes big moves, announced the arrival of a Designated Player, albeit a rather obscure one – Basle's Albanian forward Shkelzen Gashi.

Chicago Fire finished the 2015 season as the club with the league's worst record. New general manager Nelson Rodriguez reacted by making an unexpected move in announcing the new coach would be Veljko Paunovic, who led Serbia to victory in the 2015 Under-20 World Cup. Paunovic says his intention is to go with as many young – presumably American – players as he can.

The development of young players is clearly something that MLS clubs want to accelerate. All 20 clubs now have fully funded academies and the league has entered into a partnership with the French Football Federation, under which MLS coaches – those working in the academies – can take the lengthy and stringent courses that the FFF conducts for its Elite Formation Coaching licence.

Victoriano Melero, deputy director general of the French Federation, says: "The idea behind all this is to improve the training of young American players and, at the end, it will benefit of course, MLS, but in particular the national selection."

But there is a problem with that "of course MLS". Because it is not at all certain that promising starlets will opt for MLS clubs in preference to joining a team in Europe.

Another – possibly unexpected – MLS event in 2016 will be the league's decision to take a pause in its expansion programme. It will go with the 20 teams that played in 2015. However, the plans are to add two more teams in 2017: Atlanta United and Los Angeles FC. The LA club will be, in effect, a replacement for Chivas-USA which went out of business in 2014.

The big and intriguing question hanging over MLS expansion continues to be the fate of David Beckham's group and its bid for a club to operate in Miami. Finding a site for a suitable stadium has proved mighty difficult. At the moment, the group is working on its third attempt. If successful, it is expected a Beckham-operated Miami franchise will join MLS in 2018, probably along with Minnesota United, bringing the league up to 24 teams.

Success... Sebastian Giovinco was voted MLS Most Valuable Player last season

USA : MLS 2016

1 Chicago Fire
2 Colorado Rapids
3 Columbus Crew
4 Dallas
5 DC United
6 Houston Dynamo
7 LA Galaxy
8 Montreal Impact
9 New England Rev
10 New York RB
New York City
11 Orlando City
12 Philadelphia Union
13 Portland Timbers
14 Real Salt Lake
15 San Jose E'quakes
16 Seattle Sounders
17 Sporting Kansas City
18 Toronto
19 Vancouver W'caps

KEY DATES
Season starts: March 6, 2016
Season ends: October 23, 2016

MLS A-listers...David Villa (left) and Kaka

The short and mid-term prospects for MLS look good, then. The only problem yet to be worked out is how much longer the league can continue to operate under its highly restrictive financial rules – the so-called single-entity system.

While the league continues to find ingenious ways in which its clubs can spend more money than its own rules strictly allow, it becomes increasingly clear that if the dream of MLS as a world power comes to pass, it will only do so when the league decides it can afford to match the spending of the major European clubs. The alternative to that is not an appealing one. A future – already foreshadowed by some of the player deals for the 2016 season – in which MLS loses (often without being able to get any money for them) its best young players, and sees its clubs' squads filling up with over-30 players from Europe.

For the moment, the only MLS team showing pronounced geriatric tendencies is Los Angeles Galaxy, where as many as seven of the starters are likely to be over 30.

Maybe all that experience will mean another title for Arena and his men, but it seems more likely that the teams that did well in 2015 – and which are not making any sweeping changes – will continue to flourish: Red Bulls, Columbus, Portland, Seattle. And Dallas – the youngest and the most exciting team in 2015. WS

Selfie assured... Jordan Morris subbed European interest to join Seattle Sounders

MAJOR PRE-SEASON MOVES

Colorado recruit... Shkelzen Gashi

New England exit... Jermaine Jones

CHICAGO FIRE
In: Johan Kappelhof (Groningen, Hol), Joao Meira (Belenenses, Por)
Out: -

COLORADO RAPIDS
In: Shkelzen Gashi (Basle, Swi), Mekeil Williams (Antigua GFC, Gtm)
Out: Maynor Figueroa (Dallas), Marcelo Sarvas (DC United)

COLUMBUS CREW
In: Ola Kamara (Austria Vienna, Aut), Emil Larsen (Odense, Den), Amro Tarek (Real Betis, Spa, loan)
Out: Kevan George (released), Emanuel Pogatetz (Union Berlin, Ger)

DALLAS
In: Maynor Figueroa (Colorado Rapids), Carlos Gruezo (Stuttgart, Ger), Juan Esteban Ortiz (Atletico Huila, Col)
Out: -

DC UNITED
In: Marcelo Sarvas (Colorado Rapids)
Out: -

HOUSTON DYNAMO
In: Agustin Garcia (Albacete, Spa), David Rocha (Gimnastic, Spa)
Out: Brad Davis (Sporting Kansas City)

LA GALAXY
In: Ashley Cole (Roma, Ita, free), Nigel De Jong (Milan, Ita), Jeff Larentowicz (Chicago Fire), Jelle Van Damme (Standard Liege, Blg)
Out: Omar Gonzalez (Pachuca, Mex), Juninho (Tijuana, Mex)

MONTREAL IMPACT
In: Lucas Ontivero (Galatasaray, Tur, loan)
Out: Nigel Reo-Coker (released)

NEW ENGLAND REVOLUTION
In: Sambinha (Sp Lisbon, Por)
Out: Jermaine Jones (released)

NEW YORK CITY
In: Frederic Brillant (Oostende, Blg), Diego Martinez (River Plate, Arg), Ronald Matarita (Alajuelense, CR)
Out: Ned Grabavoy (Portland Timbers)

NEW YORK RED BULLS
In: Gideon Baah (HJK, Fin)
Out: Matt Miazga (Chelsea, Eng), Roy Miller (Saprissa, CR)

ORLANDO CITY
In: Antonio Nocerino (Milan, Ita)
Out: -

PHILADELPHIA UNION
In: Roland Alberg (Den Haag, Hol), Walter Restrepo (New York Cosmos)
Out: -

PORTLAND TIMBERS
In: -
Out: Will Johnson (Toronto), Jorge Villafana (Santos Laguna)

REAL SALT LAKE
In: Sunny (Alanyaspor, Tur)
Out: Sebastian Jaime (Universidad de Chile, Chl), Sebastian Saucedo (Veracruz, Mex, loan)

SAN JOSE EARTHQUAKES
In: -
Out: -

SEATTLE SOUNDERS
In: Jordan Morris (Stanford Cardinal)
Out: Obafemi Martins (Shanghai Shenhua, Chn)

SPORTING KANSAS CITY
In: -
Out: Krisztian Nemeth (Al Gharafa, Qat), Erik Palmer-Brown (Porto, Por. loan)

TORONTO
In: -
Out: -

VANCOUVER WHITECAPS
In: Fraser Aird (Rangers, Sco, loan), Christian Bolanos (Deportivo Saprissa, CR), Masato Kudo (Kashiwa Reysol, Jap)
Out: Robert Earnshaw (retired)

Galaxy import... Ashley Cole

In at Vancouver... Masato Kudo (right)

JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18, 2016

Global diary

A comprehensive record of recent events around the world

Super Cup...Lekhwiya

Wednesday January 20

ENGLAND: At 18 years and 215 days, Sheyi Ojo becomes Liverpool's youngest-ever FA Cup goalscorer as they overcome Exeter City 3-0.
FRANCE: Fourth-tier Trelissac beat Lille on penalties to reach the last 16 of the French Cup for the first time.
ITALY: In a repeat of last year's Final, in which they triumphed 2-1 in extra-time, Juventus win 1-0 away to Lazio and progress to this season's Italian Cup semi-finals.
SPAIN: Real Madrid top the Deloitte Football Money League for the 11th year in a row after generating income of £439million for last season.

Thursday January 21

BRAZIL: Despite being without a contract since leaving Fluminense in September, Ronaldinho rules out retirement and says he will look for a new club in February.
ITALY: Napoli coach Maurizio Sarri is banned for two Italian Cup matches for using homophobic language to Internazionale boss Roberto Mancini during a touchline row when their teams met in the quarter-finals.
QATAR: Reigning national champions Lekhwiya lifted the Qatar Super Cup for the first time, winning 4-1 against Al Sadd in the annual game between the league champions and the winners of the Emir of Qatar Cup.
SPAIN: Leaked documents reveal Gareth Bale cost Real Madrid a world record €100.7m in 2013, compared to the €96m they paid for Cristiano Ronaldo in 2009.

Friday January 22

GERMANY: League leaders Bayern Munich get the Bundesliga underway again after the winter break with a 2-1 win at Hamburg.
UEFA: It is announced that there will be no presidential election until Michel Platini's appeal against his eight-year ban from all football activity is complete. It was also decided that goal-line technology will be used at the Euro 2016 finals and the 2016-17 Champions League.

Saturday January 23

ARGENTINA: Five players are sent off in a friendly between River Plate and Boca Juniors.
ENGLAND: Adam Lallana scores a 95th-minute winner as Liverpool beat Norwich City 5-4. Leicester City go top with a 3-0 victory over Stoke City, while Manchester United lose 1-0 at home to Southampton.
USA: Former Chelsea striker Didier Drogba confirms he will remain with Montreal Impact next term, rather than return to London.

Sunday January 24

AUSTRALIA: Perth Glory beat Newcastle Jets 6-1 to register their biggest-ever A-League victory.
ENGLAND: Arsenal defender Per Mertesacker is sent off as his side lose 1-0 at home to Chelsea.
GERMANY: Alexander Meier completes a second-half hat-trick in injury time as Eintracht Frankfurt beat Wolfsburg 3-2.
GREECE: Dimitar Berbatov is sent off for the first time in 14 years as PAOK lose 1-0 at AEK. Panathinaikos' 2-0 win at Levadiakos is disrupted for 25 minutes as match officials order the removal of a banner protesting at sanctions imposed on the Athens club after disturbances at the derby against Olympiakos in November.
PORTUGAL: An own goal by Maritimo keeper Romain Salin gives new Porto coach Jose Peseiro a 1-0 win in his first game in charge.
SPAIN: Zinedine Zidane drops points for the first time, in his third game in charge, as Real Madrid draw 1-1 at Real Betis.

Monday January 25

ROMANIA: Steaua Bucharest refuse to release players for the national team's winter training camp in a blow to the country's preparations for this year's European Championship.
USA: Atlanta United, who will join MLS next year, sign their first player, bringing in 23-year-old goalkeeper Alexander Tambakis from Greek side Panathinaikos.

Tuesday January 26

CONMEBOL: Alejandro Dominguez of Paraguay is elected president of South American football's governing body after the only other candidate, Wilmar Valdez of Uruguay, withdrew.
ENGLAND: Liverpool, who haven't lost at home to Stoke City since 1959, go down 1-0 in the second leg of their League Cup semi-final to draw 1-1 on aggregate before winning on penalties.
FRANCE: Lille reach the League Cup Final for the first time with a 5-1 victory over Bordeaux. Frederic Hantz is appointed Montpellier coach until the end of the season.
ITALY: Making his first start for ➤

Finish...Alexander Meier scores the winner, and completes his second-half hat-trick, as Eintracht Frankfurt beat Wolfsburg 3-2

Italy

PADDY AGNEW

Champions back on top

Zaza turns the title race in favour of Juventus

The church is back in the centre of the village as Juventus beat Napoli 1-0 to go to the top of Serie A for the first time this season. And while it may have been mid-February, with some 14 games still to play, it could well be the turning point in the defending champions' campaign.

Not since the days of Michel Platini v Diego Maradona had this fixture aroused so much excitement. For the entire week beforehand, one question turned up in just about every radio and TV news programme. The issue up for discussion might have been same-sex civil union legislation (which is currently going through the Senate) or the forthcoming mayoral elections in Rome, Milan and Naples, but eventually another question reared its head: who is going to win Saturday night's big game?

You have to go back to those Maradona days of the 1980s and early 1990s to find the last time Napoli were on top, but they travelled to Turin two points clear of their hosts, and 10 ahead of third-placed Fiorentina.

Curiously, both sides got off to indifferent starts this term. Napoli picked up just two points in their first three games. After six games, Juventus were at the bottom end of the table with just five points. However, since then, little has gone wrong for either. Napoli went into the game on the back of eight successive league wins, while Juventus had won their previous 14.

As so often happens when the pressure is on, Juve-Napoli turned out to be a cautious, tight affair in which tactical discipline and defensive organisation overcomes attacking flair and individual genius. In the end, with the game set for a goalless draw, Juventus snatched the three points with an 88th-minute deflected goal from substitute striker Simone Zaza.

Until then, both goalkeepers had been largely idle bystanders in an absorbing, evenly balanced game, with few chances before Zaza's goal.

In the first half, the imperious Leonardo Bonucci had cleared an inviting cross from Napoli's right-back Elseid Hysaj just as Gonzalo Higuain was preparing to head home. Then, midway through the second period, Paul Pogba controlled a long diagonal pass on the edge of the visitors' area and set up Paulo Dybala, who hit his curving shot narrowly over the bar.

Some will argue that, given that Juventus were without at least one key player in injured defender Giorgio Chiellini and Bonucci had to limp off early in the second half, this game represented an unrepeatable opportunity for Napoli. There was also criticism that Napoli's Gonzalo Higuain had failed to perform on the big day, but that was to overlook the fact the Argentinian received little service and was effectively shut out by Andrea Barzagli and Bonucci when he did get the ball.

Which brings us to the goal. When Juve brought on Brazilian defender Alex Sandro in place of striker Dybala in the 86th minute, it seemed coach Massimiliano Allegri had settled for a draw. But within two minutes, Sandro was in action, winning a high punt out of defence that found its way to Zaza on the edge of the area.

As Napoli's French defender Kalidou Koulibaly stood off – perhaps making his only mistake of the entire game – Italy international Zaza took three steps and let loose with a speculative, left-foot blast that was deflected by defender Raul Albiol beyond keeper Pepe Reina.

This was a game that Napoli probably could and should have drawn. The big question now concerns just what psychological impact this defeat will have.

After the game, Napoli coach Maurizio Sarri, while clearly disappointed, did not sound like a man in the grip of desperation, saying: "It was a very tight game and we gave nothing away. On the contrary, we had one more chance than Juventus.

"The game was evenly balanced, decided by one episode. If you were watching on TV and turned off your set in the 87th minute, you would have found it hard to believe that we lost..." WS

Super sub...Zaza

> "If you turned off your TV in the 87th minute, you would have found it hard to believe we lost"
> Napoli boss Maurizio Sarri

Late show...Simone Zaza fires home Juventus' winner

Milan since September, Mario Balotelli scores the only goal of the game against third-tier Alessandria in the away leg of their Italian Cup semi-final.
SCOTLAND: Linlithgow Rose become the first junior team ever to reach the last 16 of the Scottish Cup, beating Forfar Athletic 1-0.

Wednesday January 27

ENGLAND: Having gone a goal down on the night to trail 3-1 on aggregate, Manchester City score three times against Everton to claim their place in the League Cup Final.
FRANCE: Paris Saint-Germain set a club record with a 12th successive win, beating Toulouse 2-0 to reach a third successive League Cup Final.
ITALY: Jeison Murillo is sent off as Internazionale lose 3-0 at Juventus in the first leg of their Italian Cup semi-final.

Thursday January 28

COLOMBIA: Atletico Nacional beat Deportivo Cali 3-0, to win 5-0 on aggregate, in the play-off between the winners of the Finalizacion and apertura tournaments, and qualify for the 2016 Sudamericana Cup.
SPAIN: Valencia and Sevilla beat Las Palmas and Mirandes respectively in the Spanish Cup quarter-finals and join Barcelona and Celta Vigo in the last four.

Friday January 29

AUSTRALIA: Western Sydney Wanderers open up a five-point lead at the top of the table by beating second-place Melbourne City 4-3.
SPAIN: FIFA provisionally suspends the transfer bans imposed on Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid after the two clubs appeal.

Saturday January 30

AFC UNDER-23 CHAMP: Japan beat South Korea 3-2 in the Final as both sides qualify for the Olympics, along with third-place Iraq.
ITALY: Francesco Totti surpasses Gianluca Pagliuca's 592 Serie A games to move into third place in the all-time appearance list as Roma beat Frosinone 3-1.
SPAIN: Barcelona come from a goal down to win 2-1 at home to Atletico Madrid – who finish with 10 men – as the top two clash.

Sunday January 31

ARGENTINA: Estudiantes and Gimnasia's pre-season friendly is abandoned after a brawl between the teams near the end of a game in which three players are sent off.
HOLLAND: Ajax are held to a 2-2 ➤

Republic of Ireland

SEAN CREEDON

Dundalk eye three-in-a-row

Thirty years since last Irish hat-trick

While the Republic of Ireland's national team is well supported, there remains only limited interest in a domestic league that has provided several players for the international side over the years, with 10 of the 25 players used by Martin O'Neill in the Euro qualifying campaign starting their careers with League of Ireland clubs.

The latest to try his luck over the water is last year's domestic player of the year, Richie Towell, with the former Celtic and Hibernian striker joining Brighton & Hove Albion after scoring 25 goals in 32 league games for champions Dundalk.

And Dundalk boss Stephen Kenny will miss Towell's goalscoring touch as he bids to lead the club to a hat-trick of titles for the first time in their history.

"It's going to be a difficult task to win three in-a-row; it's now 30 years since Jim McLaughlin did it with Shamrock Rovers [who won four consecutive crowns]," says Kenny. "Naturally we are going to miss Richie Towell, but I'm confident that my two new signings, Patrick McEleney from Derry City and Robbie Benson from UCD, will blend into the team.

"The previous season we lost centre-forward Patrick Hoban to Oxford and pushed David McMillan up front last season and he did very well for us."

Kenny expects the biggest threat to his title aspirations to come from Cork City, who finished second in 2014 and 2015, and lost the FAI Cup Final to Dundalk last term.

"Cork manager John Caulfield has signed six new players, and apart from Cork I expect Shamrock Rovers, St Patrick's Athletic and Bohemians will also be hoping to

New goal... striker Richie Towell (in white) has moved from Dundalk to Brighton

Posh boss...former Peterborough manager Dave Robertson is now in charge of Sligo

LEAGUE OF IRELAND: PREMIER DIVISION 2016

1 Bohemians (Dublin)
Shamrock Rovers
St Patrick's Athletic
2 Bray Wanderers
3 Cork City
4 Derry City
5 Dundalk
6 Finn Harps (Ballybofey)
7 Galway United
8 Longford Town
9 Sligo Rovers
10 Wexford Youths

KEY DATES
Season starts: March 4, 2016
Season ends: October 28, 2016

deny us the hat-trick," adds Kenny.

Shamrock will be without Damien Duff, who has been forced to retire after a brief spell at Rovers last term, with the 37-year-old confessing: "My heart wanted me to continue playing, but my body won the battle and told me to stop."

Another former Irish international, Liam Miller, who like Duff returned home after a spell in Australia, also looks to have played in the competition for the last time, having been released by Cork after just one season at Turner's Cross.

There were two managerial changes in pre-season, with Kenny Shiels joining Derry City and Sligo Rovers taking on ex-Peterborough manager Dave Robertson, whose last job was with Southend United under-21s.

Only formed in 2007, Wexford Youths will play in the top flight for the first time after winning the First Division and they are joined by Finn Harps. WS

OTHER LEAGUES GETTING UNDERWAY

Kazakh kings...Astana

Norwegian number one...Rosenborg

KAZAKHSTAN: PREMIER LEAGUE
Defending champions: Astana
Season starts: March 11, 2016
Season ends: November 2016

ESTONIA: MEISTRILIIGA
Defending champions: Flora
Season starts: March 4, 2016
Season ends: November 5, 2016

FAROES ISLANDS: PREMIER LEAGUE
Defending champions: B36 Torshavn
Season starts: March 4, 2016
Season ends: October 21, 2016

NORWAY: TIPPELIGAEN
Defending champions: Rosenborg
Season starts: March 11, 2016
Season ends: November 5, 2016

draw at Roda and fail to regain top spot from PSV, who beat De Graafschap 4-2 the day before.
ITALY: Internazionale coach Roberto Mancini is sent off and Mauro Icardi misses a penalty as they lose 3-0 to city rivals Milan.
SCOTLAND: Ross County beat Celtic 3-1 to reach the Scottish League Cup Final for the first time, where they will face Hibernian.
SPAIN: Cristiano Ronaldo takes his league tally against Espanyol this season to eight with a hat-trick in Real Madrid's 6-0 win.

Monday February 1

ENGLAND: Manchester City confirm Pep Guardiola will replace Manuel Pellegrini as head coach at the end of the season. The transfer window closes with Premier League clubs having spent a record £1.045billion for the season.

Tuesday February 2

CONMEBOL: Adrian Leiza, the Uruguayan vice-president of the South American confederation, resigns after what he calls a politically motivated ruling to reduce Boca Juniors' stadium ban for crowd violence in last year's Libertadores Cup from eight games to two.
ENGLAND: Tottenham Hotspur win 3-0 at Norwich City to go third, above Arsenal who draw 0-0 at home to Southampton. Leicester City stay top by beating Liverpool 2-0.
FRANCE: Florian Thauvin, who rejoined Marseille on loan from Newcastle United two days earlier, is sent off 10 minutes after appearing as a sub following a wild challenge on Montpellier's Hilton in OM's 1-0 win.

Wednesday February 3

BELGIUM: In the Belgian Cup, Club Brugge beat Gent 1-0 on the night to draw 2-2 on aggregate and win on away goals. They will face Standard Liege, who beat Genk, in the Final.
CHINA: Guangzhou Evergrande sign Jackson Martinez from Atletico Madrid for £31m.
FRANCE: Paris Saint-Germain set a new Ligue 1 record of 33 games unbeaten with a 3-1 victory over Lorient in Laurent Blanc's 100th league game as PSG coach.
HOLLAND: VVSB, from the seaside resort of Noordwijkerhout, become the first amateur side to reach the semi-finals of the Dutch Cup since 1975 with a 3-2 win at Den Bosch. The third-tier side had trailed 2-0.
ITALY: At the 23rd time of asking, Verona finally win a league game this season, beating Atalanta 2-1. Napoli stay top with a 2-0 victory ➤

Japan

MIKE PLASTOW

Youth set to lead the way

High hopes for Rio as new season kicks off

While the new J.League season kicks off with intense focus on last year's big three of Sanfrecce Hiroshima, Urawa Reds and Gamba Osaka, plus resurgent Kashima Antlers, Japan's qualification for the Rio Olympics – secured by winning every match at the Asian Under-23 Championship in January – has given the media and fans the opportunity to keep tabs on a new generation of stars.

Sanfrecce Hiroshima are again the team to beat after winning a third J.League title in four years in December. Hiroshima hasn't seen anything like it since Toyo Kogyo – the club which became Sanfrecce – won five titles in the amateur Japan Soccer League's first six seasons from 1965 to 1970.

Sanfrecce's third-place finish at the Club World Cup – following a 2-1 win over China's Guangzhou Evergrande – reconfirmed what a good side they are and Toshihiro Aoyama, the 2015 J.League Player of the Year, even allowed himself the luxury of saying he felt they should have gone higher.

The big change at Sanfrecce this season is the departure of Brazilian striker Douglas, their top scorer with 21 goals last season, to Al Ain in the UAE. Peter Utaka, on loan from just relegated Shimizu S-Pulse, has the difficult task of filling his shoes. The Nigerian scored nine times last term and will fancy his chances of doing considerably better at the top of the table.

Coach Hajime Moriyasu, now in his fifth season at the helm, is otherwise standing by his proven squad – and with players such as J.League Young Player of the Year Takuma Asano coming through, who can blame him?

At Urawa Reds, former Sanfrecce boss Mihailo Petrovic is also starting his fifth year in charge. Urawa will again mount a mighty challenge after finishing runners-up in 2014 and second overall again in last season's new two-stage system. It has been a decade since Japan's best-supported club won their only championship, in 2006, and they have added to their squad by bringing in Slovenian full-back Branko Ilic from Astana of Kazakhstan.

Happy...Sanfrecce celebrate third place at the Club World Cup

On target... Shinzo Koroki scores for Urawa Reds in their 2-1 Emperor's Cup Final defeat by Gamba Osaka

> "To be competitive at the Olympics we have to improve every aspect of the team"
> Japan under-23 coach Makoto Teguramori

Urawa's current nemesis are 2014 treble winners Gamba Osaka, who not only beat them in the first and last domestic games of last season – the Super Cup and Emperor's Cup Final – but also ended Reds' title hopes in last term's championship play-off semi-final.

Gamba finished last season on a high, only falling narrowly to Sanfrecce in the championship Final and then defeating the champions 3-0 in the Emperor's Cup semi-final in December,.

Gamba should gain momentum from starting the new season in their handsome new 40,000-capacity Suita City Football Stadium. Kenta Hasegawa has won silverware in all three years at the helm so far and his team will again be hard to beat.

Kashima Antlers, League Cup winners and runners-up in last season's second stage, look ready to rise back to the top. The J.League's most crowned club with seven championships, they haven't won the league since 2009 but may have emerged from the doldrums under Masatada Ishii, the former Antlers defender.

Antlers' promising squad includes three of Japan's heroes from the Asian Under-23 Championship in Doha: goalkeeper Masatoshi Kushibiki, midfielder Kento Misao and defender Naomichi Ueda, whose all-important fifth-minute goal gave Japan a 1-0 victory in their opening match against North Korea.

The Japan under-23s have given the domestic league a welcome boost at just the right time as, unlike the senior national squad, almost all of the team still play in the country, including skipper Wataru Endo, who has just moved from Shonan Bellmare to Reds, FC Tokyo's Shoya Nakajima, Kawasaki Frontale's Ryota Oshima and Gamba's Yosuke Ideguchi.

FC Tokyo, the club Gamba leap-frogged into third place on the final day of the season, must also be watched. Hiroshi Jofuku, who led the club from 2008-10, returns to the helm now that Massimo Ficcadenti has moved to Sagan Tosu.

Erick Mombaerts' Yokohama F-Marinos, where Shunsuke Nakamura captains a richly experienced squad, and Kawasaki Frontale, where Yoshito Okubu has been the league's top scorer for three seasons in a row, should also be in the thick of things.

There will be strong interest, too, in seeing how newly promoted Omiya Ardija, Jubilo Iwata and Avispa Fukuoka fare back in the top flight after all three enjoyed a spectacular season last year in the second tier. WS

JAPAN: J1 LEAGUE 2016

1 Albirex Niigata
2 Avispa Fukuoka
3 Gamba Osaka
4 Jubilo Iwata
5 Kashima Antlers
6 Kashiwa Reysol (Gt Tokyo)
Kawasaki Frontale
Omiya Ardija
Shonan Bellmare
Tokyo
Urawa Red Diamonds
Yokohama F-Marinos
7 Nagoya Grampus
8 Sagan Tosu
9 Sanfrecce Hiroshima
10 Vegalta Sendai
11 Ventforet Kofu
12 Vissel Kobe

KEY DATES
League season starts: February 27, 2016
League season ends: November 3, 2016

at Lazio, while Juventus set a club record of 13 straight Serie A wins with a 1-0 victory over Genoa.

SCOTLAND: The day after being bitten by his own dog, Jonny Hayes scores for Aberdeen as they beat Celtic 2-1 and close the gap at the top of the table to three points.

SPAIN: Four goals from Luis Suarez and a Lionel Messi hat-trick sees Valencia fall to their heaviest Spanish Cup defeat since 1928 as they are thrashed 7-0 at Barcelona in the first leg of their semi-final tie.

Thursday February 4

ARGENTINA: Estudiantes' Mariano Andujar and Nicolas Mazzola of Gimnasia, along with Alvaro Pereira – who has since left Estudiantes to join Malaga on loan in Spain – are handed eight-game bans for their part in a brawl that saw a friendly between the two rivals from La Plata abandoned on Sunday. Twelve other players are suspended for between one and five matches.

CHINA: The Chinese transfer record is broken for the third time in eight days as Jiangsu Suning pay £38.4m for Alex Teixeira of Shakhtar Donetsk.

SPAIN: Sevilla beat Celta Vigo 4-0 in the home leg of their Spanish Cup semi-final.

Friday February 5

PORTUGAL: Kostas Mitroglou scores a hat-trick as Benfica win 5-0 at Belenenses to go top of the table.

SOUTH AFRICA: Ajax Cape Town withdraw from the Confederation Cup due to travel concerns over Saturday's game away to Angolan side Sagrada Esperanca. Late withdrawals from CAF competitions automatically invoke a three-year ban.

Saturday February 6

ENGLAND: Leicester City extend their lead at the top of the league with a 3-1 win at second-place Manchester City. Tottenham Hotspur move above Man City later in the day with a 1-0 victory at home to Watford.

GERMANY: Xabi Alonso is sent off as Bayern Munich draw 0-0 at Bayer Leverkusen.

SPAIN: Fernando Torres scores his 100th goal for Atletico Madrid as they beat Eibar 3-1.

Sunday February 7

AFRICAN NATIONS CHAMP: DR Congo win the tournament for home-based players for a second time, beating Mali 3-0 in the Final. Ivory Coast take third place with a 2-1 victory over Guinea.

ENGLAND: Diego Costa's injury-time equaliser denies Manchester ➤

United victory in a 1-1 draw away at Chelsea.
FRANCE: Paris Saint-Germain win 2-1 away to arch-rivals Marseille. Saint-Etienne move into fourth place with a 4-1 victory at Bordeaux.
ITALY: Napoli beat Carpi 1-0 to claim a club-record eighth consecutive league victory and maintain a two-point lead over Juventus, who win 2-0 at Frosinone.
SCOTLAND: Paul Hanlon scores in injury time as Hibernian come from 2-0 down to draw 2-2 at local rivals Hearts in the Scottish Cup fifth round.

Monday February 8

PORTUGAL: Sporting Lisbon are held to a goalless draw at home by Rio Ave and miss the chance to go top.

Tuesday February 9

ARGENTINA: Hours after his injury-time goal puts Huracan into the group stage of the Libertadores Cup, Diego Mendoza is one of five players taken to hospital after their team bus crashes in Venezuela. The Argentinian side lost 2-1 to Caracas but went through on away goals after winning their home leg 1-0.
AUSTRALIA: Marcelo Carrusca misses a second-half penalty as Adelaide United lose at home in continental competition for the first time in six years, going down 2-1 to 10-man Chinese side Shandong Luneng in the AFC Champions League qualifying play-off round.
EGYPT: Al Ahly beat Zamalek 2-0 in the 154th derby meeting between the Cairo rivals to go seven points clear of their visitors at the top of the league.
FRANCE: Sochaux, who are second bottom in Ligue 2, beat Monaco 2-1 in the last 16 of the French Cup. GFC Ajaccio come from behind to win 2-1 at fourth-tier Saint Malo, while fifth division Granville progress with a 1-0 victory over Bourg-Peronnas.
URUGUAY: River Plate of Montevideo, in their debut Libertadores campaign, draw 0-0 away to Universidad de Chile to win 2-0 on aggregate and qualify for the group stage.

Wednesday February 10

ENGLAND: Liverpool scrap plans to introduce a top-price £77 ticket in their new main stand after thousands of fans left Anfield after 77 minutes of Saturday's 2-2 home draw against Sunderland in protest.
FRANCE: Bordeaux suspend defender Lamine Sane and keeper Jerome Prior indefinitely for what the club call a "serious incident" after their 4-3 extra-time loss to Nantes in the French Cup.
GERMANY: Huub Stevens steps ➤

Gambia

STEVE MENARY

Home search under way

New coach seeks new players

Sang Ndong has returned to the Gambia hot seat and will draw on players closer to home for the forthcoming African Nations Cup double-header with Mauritania.

A former Gambian international, Ndong was coaching club side Banjul Hawks and replaces Swiss Raoul Savoy, who left at the end of 2015 claiming his departure was linked to the withdrawal of a "dark sponsor".

Savoy, who has previously been in charge of the Central African Republic, said: "That made things very difficult to proceed, to bring in overseas players and play friendly games. Without money in Africa, it is difficult. It was a shame as the project was going well. The players are good. The local football is not very developed but Gambia has a lot of players outside the country. There is no reason they cannot do well with a local coach."

Under Savoy, Gambia were knocked out of the 2018 World Cup qualifiers by Namibia. Ranked 69 in the FIFA rankings in 2009, they have since slumped to 165 – close to their all-time low of 169.

Gambia under-17s coach Matt M'boge, who was part of Savoy's coaching team and will work with Ndong, says: "The resources didn't come [for Savoy] but if you are paying someone a lot of money in Gambian terms you have to deliver. It all snowballed and people were saying they didn't want to keep paying. Expectations are high when you have a foreign coach. Sang will look to a lot of home-based players as he knows the league."

Success abroad...Sanna Nyassi plays for San Jose Earthquakes

Acrobatic...Pa Modou Jagne controls a high ball in an African Nations Cup qualifier against South Africa

> "If you are paying someone a lot of money in Gambian terms you have to deliver"
> Matt M'boge, part of the national coaching set-up

Winger Alhaji Momodo Nije, known as "Biri Biri", scored 32 goals in 99 league games for Sevilla in the 1970s, but no Gambian has since scaled those heights overseas.

Modou Barrow joined English Premier League side Swansea City in 2014, but has spent most of his time on loan, while Pa Modo Jagne plays for Swiss side Sion. Most Gambians play in places such as China, Finland, Hungary and Israel.

A combination of reduced playing time at their clubs and a long journey home – Bubacarr Trawally plays for Chinese club Yanbian Fude and it takes him 25 hours to reach Banjul – are behind Ndong's shift in focus.

"I'm watching these overseas players and some are barely getting games," says M'boge. "We have to be realistic. We have players here and there, but what are they contributing?"

As Gambians speak English, a soccer scholarship in the United States has been a route out for the likes of Abdoulie Mansally and Sanna Nyassi, who play at Real Salt Lake and San Jose Earthquakes respectively.

After making his breakthrough at Portland Timbers, Mamadou "Futty" Danso now plays for Carolina Railhawks in the NASL.

"College is a way out because you get an education too," says Danso. "If you are good enough at college you can be good enough to play in the MLS or NASL. But when I was at Portland, the travelling time home was 22 hours. You have to by physically and mentally ready for the international break."

The journey from the east coast is less but, under Ndong, Danso could be spared the trek.

Overseas players will not be shunned completely and Ndong will certainly look to the burgeoning professional league in neighbouring Senegal. M'boge adds: "There are 14 Gambians in the first division and more in the second. Even Gambians playing in the second tier would get four times more games than at home."

Wages in the Gambian First Division are only around $30 a month, while Gambians in the Senegalese top flight earn a minimum of $200.

In contrast, despite entry costing little more than 20 cents, the Gambian league struggles to compete and crowds are low.

Qualification for the 2017 African Nations Cup finals would be a major fillip. Cameroon are expected to win the group, but Gambia could qualify as one of the best group runners-up.

"There is still a chance to qualify. Our backs are against the wall so we need to win both games against Mauritania," says Danso, who remains keen to be involved.

However, if Gambia do make it through, that success may be brief.

"Even if we qualify, I don't think it's sustainable with the players we have," admits M'boge. "Some have been playing for the national team for 10 years and there's hardly any players coming through."

Just one more reason why Ndong will look closer to home in future. WS

WHERE IN THE WORLD?

Located on the coast of West Africa, the Gambia is a former British colony, which gained independence in 1965.

Size: 11,300 sq km
Population: 2 million
Capital: Banjul
Languages: English, Mandinka, Wolof and Fula
Religion: Muslim

down as Hoffenheim coach and announces his retirement, saying: "I suffer from cardiac arrhythmia and probably have to undergo surgery in the near future."

MOROCCO: The Royal Moroccan Football Federation says national coach Badou Zaki has left his post by mutual consent "after 20 months of instability and inconsistent results".

SOUTH AFRICA: Ajax Cape Town reverse their decision and will now travel to Angola at the weekend to play Sagrada Esperanca in the African Confederation Cup after the South Africa Football Association threatened the club with severe sanctions.

SPAIN: Barcelona draw 1-1 at Valencia in the Spanish Cup to make it a club-record 29 consecutive games unbeaten in all competitions.

Thursday February 11

AUSTRALIA: A-League leaders Western Sydney Wanderers are handed a suspended three-point deduction after fans let off flares and sound bombs during the 1-1 draw away to defending champions Melbourne Victory at the weekend.

ENGLAND: Ex-England winger Adam Johnson is sacked by Sunderland after pleading guilty to one count of sexual activity with a 15-year-old girl and one charge of grooming.

FRANCE: Laurent Blanc signs a new two-year deal to carry on as coach of Paris Saint-Germain.

SPAIN: Sevilla will meet Barcelona in the Spanish Cup Final after a 2-2 draw at Celta Vigo sees them progress 6-2 on aggregate.

Friday February 12

FIFA: Former general-secretary Jerome Valcke is banned from all footballing activities for 12 years.

PORTUGAL: Porto come from behind to win 2-1 at bitter rivals Benfica.

Saturday February 13

FRANCE: Paris Saint-Germain's run of 16 consecutive wins in all competitions comes to an end with a goalless draw at home to Lille.

GREECE: AEK end Olympiakos' 21-game unbeaten start to the season with a 1-0 win, in which three players are sent off.

ITALY: Juventus go top of Serie A for the first time this term with a 1-0 win at home to previous leaders Napoli. Substitute Simone Zaza's goal two minutes from time gives Juve a 15th successive league success. Frosinone win away in the top flight for the first time ever, beating Empoli 2-1.

MALAYSIA: Johor Darul Ta'zim beat Selangor on penalties to win the Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah Cup after ➤

a 1-1 draw. The traditional curtain-raiser to the season, between the reigning Super League champions and the Malaysian Cup holders, also counts as a league match, so both sides start the new campaign with a point each.

NORTHERN IRELAND: Cliftonville become the first team to win four League Cups in a row, with a 3-0 victory over Ards, who were only the second club from outside the top flight to reach the Final.

SPAIN: At the 10th attempt, Gary Neville wins his first Liga game as coach of Valencia with a 2-1 victory over Espanyol.

Sunday *February 14*

ENGLAND: As the top four clubs all meet, Arsenal beat table-toppers Leicester City 2-1, while Tottenham Hotspur go second with a 2-1 win at Manchester City, who drop to fourth. Aston Villa's 6-0 loss to Liverpool is their heaviest at home since 1935.

FRANCE: Ivorian defender Serge Aurier is suspended indefinitely by Paris Saint-Germain for making homophobic comments about coach Laurent Blanc in an online video.

HOLLAND: Feyenoord's 3-1 loss at PEC Zwolle is a club-record seventh straight league defeat.

Monday *February 15*

HOLLAND: The Dutch FA confirms that there was an attempt to fix the Eredivisie game between Willem II and Utrecht in 2009.

ZAMBIA: Fighton Simukonda, who coached the national team at last year's African Under-23 Nations Cup in Senegal, passes away on his 58th birthday following an unsuccessful battle with diabetes.

Tuesday *February 16*

ENGLAND: Chelsea suffer a first defeat since caretaker manager Guus Hiddink took charge in November, losing 2-1 to Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League.

RUSSIA: Lokomotiv Moscow's team bus is pelted with bottles before the Europa League game in Turkey against Fenerbahce, which they lost 2-0. Tensions have been high since Turkey shot down a Russian jet that violated its airspace near the Syrian border in November.

SCOTLAND: Hibernian beat Hearts 1-0 in a feisty Edinburgh derby to reach the quarter-finals of the Scottish Cup. Goalscorer Jason Cummings was later sent off, along with Hearts' Blazej Augustyn.

SPAIN: A court in Brazil orders assets, which include a private jet, worth €45m belonging to Barcelona star Neymar to be frozen.

UKRAINE: Andriy Shevchenko, who is the national side's all-time top scorer with 48 goals, joins Ukraine's coaching staff ahead of Euro 2016.

Wednesday *February 17*

BOLIVIA: The Strongest win away in the Libertadores Cup for the first time since 1982, beating Sao Paulo 1-0 in Brazil.

FRANCE: Bastia's home game against Nantes on Saturday is postponed following clashes between fans and police in the Corsican city on Monday and Tuesday. The violence was said to be in response to the arrest of eight fans in Reims following Bastia's 1-0 victory the previous weekend.

SPAIN: With the first of his two goals in Barcelona's 3-1 win at Sporting Gijon, Lionel Messi becomes the first player to score 300 times in La Liga.

UZBEKISTAN: Reigning league champions Pakhtakor lose the season-opening Super Cup for the third time in four years, beaten 1-0 by Uzbek Cup winners Nasaf.

Thursday *February 18*

AUSTRALIA: Wellington Phoenix are handed a 10-year licence extension to play in the A-League by Football Federation Australia, who had rejected an application in October.

SPAIN: Valencia match the Europa League's record score, beating Rapid Vienna 6-0. WS

Leader ...Gonzalo Higuain

Impressive... Riyad Mahrez

Pos	NAME		Goals	Factor	Points
1	Gonzalo Higuain	Napoli	24	2	48
2	Jonas Goncalves	Benfica	23	2	46
3	Luis Suarez	Barcelona	23	2	46
4	Robert Lewandowski	Bayern Munich	21	2	42
	Cristiano Ronaldo	Real Madrid	21	2	42
6	Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang	Borussia Dortmund	20	2	40
7	Karim Benzema	Real Madrid	19	2	38
	Jamie Vardy	Leicester City	19	2	38
9	Eran Zahavi	Maccabi Tel Aviv	25	1.5	37.5
10	Islam Slimani	Sporting Lisbon	18	2	36
11	Nemanja Nikolic	Legia Warsaw	23	1.5	34.5
12	Neymar	Barcelona	17	2	34
13	Alex Teixeira	Shakhtar Donetsk	22	1.5	33
14	Borja	Eibar	16	2	32
	Harry Kane	Tottenham Hotspur	16	2	32
	Romelu Lukaku	Everton	16	2	32
17	Zlatan Ibrahimovic	Paris Saint-Germain	21	1.5	31.5
18	Thomas Muller	Bayern Munich	15	2	30
19	Fernando Cavenaghi	APOEL	19	1.5	28.5
20	Sergio Aguero	Manchester City	14	2	28
	Odion Ighalo	Watford	14	2	28
	Lucas Perez	Deportivo La Coruna	14	2	28
	Riyad Mahrez	Leicester City	14	2	28
	Tomas Radzinevicius	Suduva	28	1	28
25	Aritz Aduriz	Athletic Bilbao	13	2	26
	Carlos Bacca	Milan	13	2	26

Pos	NAME		Goals	Factor	Points
	Gareth Bale	Real Madrid	13	2	26
	Paulo Dybala	Juventus	13	2	26
	Kevin Gameiro	Sevilla	13	2	26
	Javier Hernandez	Bayer Leverkusen	13	2	26
	Lionel Messi	Barcelona	25	1	25
	Bruno Moreira	Pacos Ferreira	25	1	25
33	Luuk De Jong	PSV	25	1	25
34	David Arshakyan	Trakai	12	2	24
	Richard Towell	Dundalk	12	2	24
36	Imanol Agirretxe	Real Sociedad	16	1.5	24
	Eder	Sampdoria/Internazionale	16	1.5	24
	Olivier Giroud	Arsenal	12	2	24
	Antoine Griezmann	Atletico Madrid	16	1.5	24
	Rafael Martins	Moreirense	16	1.5	24
	Alexander Meier	Eintracht Frankfurt	12	2	24
	Konstantinos Mitroglou	Benfica	12	2	24
	Ingemar Teever	Levadia Tallinn	12	2	24
44	Kostas Fortounis	Olympiakos	12	2	24
	Mario Gomez	Besiktas	24	1	24
	Deniss Rakels	Cracovia	12	2	24
	Onatan Soriano	Red Bull Salzburg	12	2	24
	Nikolai Yanush	Shakhtyor Saligorsk	12	2	24
49	Vincent Aboubakar	Porto	24	1	24
	Gerard Gohou	Kairat Almaty	12	2	24
	Leigh Griffiths	Celtic	12	2	24
	Alexander Soderlund	Rosenborg	12	2	24

Latest standings at 14.02.16

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

JANUARY 2016

HOW IT WORKS

Every month, journalists from each member of the European Sports Media group select their first XI based on the best individual performances from Europe's top competitions. For details of how each ESM member voted, visit worldsoccer.com/esm11

SEASON RANKINGS

Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Keylor NAVAS (Real Madrid)	21 votes
Petr CECH (Arsenal)	8
Claudio BRAVO (Barcelona)	6
Manuel NEUER (Bayern Munich)	5
Gianluigi BUFFON (Juventus)	4
Pepe REINA (Napoli)	4
Gianluigi DONNARUMMA (Milan)	3
Samir HANDANOVIC (Internazionale)	3
Jan OBLAK (Atletico Madrid)	3
Kasper SCHMEICHEL (Leicester City)	2
Thibaut COURTOIS (Chelsea)	1
David DE GEA (Manchester United)	1
Ralf FAHRMANN (Schalke)	1
Joe HART (Manchester City)	1
Marvin HITZ (Augsburg)	1
Carlos KAMENI (Malaga)	1
Fernando MUSLERA (Galatasaray)	1
Hakon OPDAL (Start)	1
Sergio RICO (Sevilla)	1
Victor VALDES (Standard Liege)	1

DEFENDERS

Diego GODIN (Atletico Madrid)	21
MARCELO (Real Madrid)	19
Jerome BOATENG (Bayern Munich)	11
DANI ALVES (Barcelona)	10
Serge AURIER (Paris Saint-Germain)	9
Laurent KOSCIELNY (Arsenal)	9
Philipp LAHM (Bayern Munich)	9
David ALABA (Bayern Munich)	8
Gerard PIQUE (Barcelona)	8
THIAGO SILVA (Paris Saint-Germain)	8
Toby ALDERWEIRELD (Tottenham Hotspur)	7
FILIPE LUIS (Atletico Madrid)	7
Matthias GINTER (Borussia Dortmund)	6
Mats HUMMELS (Borussia Dortmund)	6
Nicolas OTAMENDI (Manchester City)	6
Jeison MURILLO (Internazionale)	5
Sergio RAMOS (Real Madrid)	5
Chris SMALLING (Manchester United)	5
Raphael VARANE (Real Madrid)	5
ALEX SANDRO (Juventus)	4
Hector BELLERIN (Arsenal)	4
Alessandro FLORENZI (Roma)	4
Nacho MONREAL (Arsenal)	4
Jordi ALBA (Barcelona)	3
Andrea BARZAGLI (Juventus)	3
DANILO (Real Madrid)	3
Matteo DARMIAN (Manchester United)	3
JUANFRAN (Atletico Madrid)	3
Kalidou KOULIBALY (Napoli)	3
Javi MARTINEZ (Bayern Munich)	3
Lukasz PISZCZEK (Borussia Dortmund)	3
Victor RUIZ (Villarreal)	3
Raul ALBIOL (Napoli)	2
Leonardo BONUCCI (Juventus)	2
Giorgio CHIELLINI (Juventus)	2
Christian FUCHS (Leicester City)	2
Robert HUTH (Leicester City)	2
Miguel LAYUN (Porto)	2
Stephan LICHTSTEINER (Juventus)	2
MAXWELL (Paris Saint-Germain)	2
Mateo MUSACCHIO (Villarreal)	2
Kurt ZOUMA (Chelsea)	2
Davide ASTORI (Fiorentina)	1
Juan BERNAT (Bayern Munich)	1
Daley BLIND (Manchester United)	1
Olivier BOSCAGLI (Napoli)	1
Alberto BOTIA (Olympiakos)	1
Dani CARVAJAL (Real Madrid)	1
Nathaniel CLYNE (Liverpool)	1
Patrice EVRA (Juventus)	1
FABIO COENTRAO (Monaco)	1
Roderic FILIPPI (GFC Ajaccio)	1
Branislav IVANOVIC (Chelsea)	1
Christophe JALLET (Lyon)	1
Presnel KIMPEMBE (Paris Saint-Germain)	1
Vincent KOMPANY (Manchester City)	1
Julian KORB (Borussia Monchengladbach)	1
Layvin KURZAWA (Paris Saint-Germain)	1
Sebastian LANGKAMP (Hertha Berlin)	1
Dejan LOVREN (Liverpool)	1
MAICON (Roma)	1
Adam MASINIA (Bologna)	1
MAURICIO (Lazio)	1
MIRANDA (Internazionale)	1
NALDO (Wolfsburg)	1
Erik PIETERS (Stoke City)	1
Winston REID (West Ham United)	1
Gonzalo RODRIGUEZ (Fiorentina)	1
Bacary SAGNA (Manchester City)	1
Nelson SEMEDO (Benfica)	1
SERGI Roberto (Barcelona)	1
Martin SKRTEL (Liverpool)	1
Aytac SULU (Darmstadt)	1
Jonathan TAH (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Alex TELLES (Internazionale)	1
John TERRY (Chelsea)	1
Patrick VAN AANHOLT (Sunderland)	1
Gregory VAN DER WIEL (Paris Saint-Germain)	1
Jan VERTONGHEN (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Oscar WENDT (Borussia Monchengladbach)	1
Dries WUYTENS (Willem II)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Mesut OZIL (Arsenal)	21
Riyad MAHREZ (Leicester City)	15
Kevin DE BRUYNE (Manchester City)	14
Angel DI MARIA (Paris Saint-Germain)	14
DOUGLAS COSTA (Bayern Munich)	14
Thomas MULLER (Bayern Munich)	14
Paul POGBA (Juventus)	10
Andres INIESTA (Barcelona)	8
Philippe COUTINHO (Liverpool)	6
Dele ALLI (Tottenham Hotspur)	5
Sergio BUSQUETS (Barcelona)	5
CASEMIRO (Real Madrid)	4
Hakan CALHANOGLU (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
FELIPE MELO (Internazionale)	3
N'Golo KANTE (Leicester City)	3
Henrykh MKHITARYAN (Borussia Dortmund)	3
Ivan RAKITIC (Barcelona)	3
Julian WEIGL (Borussia Dortmund)	3
Jose CALLEJON (Napoli)	2
Francis COQUELIN (Arsenal)	2
JORGINHO (Napoli)	2
Gary MEDEL (Internazionale)	2
Luka MODRIC (Real Madrid)	2
Dmitri PAYET (West Ham United)	2
Miralem PJANIC (Roma)	2
TIAGO (Atletico Madrid)	2
XABI ALONSO (Bayern Munich)	2
ADRIEN SILVA (Sporting Lisbon)	1
ANDRE ANDRE (Porto)	1
Ross BARKLEY (Everton)	1
Karim BELLARABI (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Santi CAZORLA (Arsenal)	1
Kingsley COMAN (Bayern Munich)	1
Lassana DIARRA (Marseille)	1
Daniel DIDAVI (Stuttgart)	1
FELIPE ANDERSON (Lazio)	1
Matias FERNANDEZ (Fiorentina)	1
Nicolas GAITAN (Benfica)	1
Fredy GUARIN (Internazionale)	1
KOKE (Atletico Madrid)	1
Yevhen KONOPLYANKA (Sevilla)	1
Erik LAMELA (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Juan MATA (Manchester United)	1
Blaise MATUIDI (Paris Saint-Germain)	1
James MILNER (Liverpool)	1
Cheikh N'DOYE (Angers)	1
OSCAR (Chelsea)	1
Dennis PRAET (Anderlecht)	1
Adrien RABIOT (Paris Saint-Germain)	1
Marco REUS (Borussia Dortmund)	1
James RODRIGUEZ (Real Madrid)	1
Bryan RUIZ (Sporting Lisbon)	1
David SILVA (Manchester City)	1
Marc STENDERA (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
THIAGO ALCANTARA (Bayern Munich)	1
Yaya TOURE (Manchester City)	1
Borja VALERO (Fiorentina)	1
Arturo VIDAL (Bayern Munich)	1
Daniel WASS (Celta Vigo)	1
Georginio WIJNALDUM (Newcastle United)	1

FORWARDS

Luis SUAREZ (Barcelona)	28
NEYMAR (Barcelona)	20
Robert LEWANDOWSKI (Bayern Munich)	19
Pierre-Emerick AUBAMEYANG (Borussia Dortmund)	17
Gonzalo HIGUAIN (Napoli)	17
Jamie VARDY (Leicester City)	17
Paulo DYBALA (Juventus)	12
Karim BENZEMA (Real Madrid)	9
Cristiano RONALDO (Real Madrid)	8
Anthony MARTIAL (Manchester United)	6
NOLITO (Celta Vigo)	6
Javier HERNANDEZ (Bayer Leverkusen)	5
Zlatan IBRAHIMOVIC (Paris Saint-Germain)	5
Lionel MESSI (Barcelona)	5
Gareth BALE (Real Madrid)	4
Olivier GIROUD (Arsenal)	3
Antoine GRIEZMANN (Atletico Madrid)	3
JONAS (Benfica)	3
Marko ARNAUTOVIC (Stoke City)	2
Kevin GAMEIRO (Sevilla)	2
Odion IGHALO (Watford)	2
Romelu LUKAKU (Everton)	2
ALEX TEIXEIRA (Shakhtar Donetsk)	1
Borja BASTON (Eibar)	1
Hatem BEN ARFA (Nice)	1
Roberto FIRMINO (Liverpool)	1
Rudy GESTEDE (Aston Villa)	1
Kelechi IHEANACHO (Manchester City)	1
Lorenzo INSIGNE (Napoli)	1
Harry KANE (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Dirk KUYT (Feyenoord)	1
Massimo MACCARONE (Empoli)	1
Mario MANDZUKIC (Juventus)	1
Wayne ROONEY (Manchester United)	1
Alexis SANCHEZ (Arsenal)	1
Leroy SANE (Schalke)	1
Islam SLIMANI (Sporting Lisbon)	1

ESM – EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

The members of ESM are: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Elf* (Holland), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allegmeine Zeitung* (Germany), *Goal News* (Greece), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *So Foot* (France), *Sport* (Belgium), *Sport Express* (Russia), *De Telegraaf* (Holland), *TIPSbladet* (Denmark), *World Soccer* (England). More details of votes at **worldsoccer.com/votes**

Internationals

AFRICAN NATIONS CHAMPIONSHIP

(featuring only players playing in the domestic league of the country they represent)

Played in Rwanda

Group A

Jan 16: Rwanda 1 Ivory Coast 0; Gabon 0 Morocco 0.
Jan 20: Rwanda 2 Gabon 1; Morocco 0 Ivory Coast 1.
Jan 24: Morocco 4 Rwanda 1; Ivory Coast 4 Gabon 1.

AFRICAN NATIONS CHAMPIONSHIP – GROUP A	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Rwanda (Q)	3	2	0	1	4	5	6
Ivory Coast (Q)	3	2	0	1	5	2	6
Morocco	3	1	1	1	4	2	4
Gabon	3	0	1	2	2	6	1

Group B

Jan 17: DR Congo 3 Ethiopia 0; Angola 0 Cameroon 1.
Jan 21: DR Congo 4 Angola 2; Cameroon 0 Ethiopia 0.
Jan 25: Ethiopia 1 Angola 2; Cameroon 3 DR Congo 1.

AFRICAN NATIONS CHAMPIONSHIP – GROUP B	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cameroon (Q)	3	2	1	0	4	1	7
DR Congo (Q)	3	2	0	1	8	5	6
Angola	3	1	0	2	4	6	3
Ethiopia	3	0	1	2	1	5	1

Group C

Jan 18: Tunisia 2 Guinea 2; Nigeria 4 Niger 1.
Jan 22: Tunisia 1 Nigeria 1; Niger 2 Guinea 2.
Jan 26: Guinea 1 Nigeria 0; Niger 0 Tunisia 5.

AFRICAN NATIONS CHAMPIONSHIP – GROUP C	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tunisia (Q)	3	1	2	0	8	3	5
Guinea (Q)	3	1	2	0	5	4	5
Nigeria	3	1	1	1	5	3	4
Niger	3	0	1	2	3	11	1

Group D

Jan 19: Zimbabwe 0 Zambia 1; Mali 2 Uganda 2.
Jan 23: Zimbabwe 0 Mali 1; Uganda 0 Zambia 1.
Jan 27: Zambia 0 Mali 0; Uganda 1 Zimbabwe 1.

AFRICAN NATIONS CHAMPIONSHIP – GROUP D	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zambia (Q)	3	2	1	0	2	0	7
Mali (Q)	3	1	2	0	3	2	5
Uganda	3	0	2	1	3	4	2
Zimbabwe	3	0	1	2	1	3	1

● *The top 2 in each group qualified for the quarter-finals*

Quarter-finals

Jan 30: Rwanda 1 DR Congo 2 (aet); Cameroon 0 Ivory Coast 3 (aet).
Jan 31: Tunisia 1 Mali 2; Zambia 0 Guinea 0 (aet, Guinea 5-4 on pens).

Semi-finals

Feb 3: DR Congo 1 Guinea 1 (aet, DR Congo 5-4 on pens).
Feb 4: Mali 1 Ivory Coast 0.

3rd-place match

Feb 7: Guinea 1 Ivory Coast 2.

Final

Feb 7 - Kigali
DR Congo 3 (Meschak 29, 61, Bolingi 73)
Mali 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Bennett (SAf)

Previous winners

2009	DR Congo
2011	Tunisia
2014	Libya

BANGABANDHU GOLD CUP

Played in Bangladesh

Group A

Jan 8 - Jessore
Sri Lanka 2 (Figurado pen 21, Sanjeewa 51)
Bangladesh 4 (Rony 17, 88, Y Khan 22, Jibon 44)
HT: 1-3

Jan 9 - Jessore
Malaysia XI 0
Nepal 0

Jan13 - Dhaka
Nepal 1 (Magar 4)
Sri Lanka 0
HT: 1-0

Jan13 - Dhaka
Bangladesh 1 (M Chowdhury 76)
Malaysia XI 1 (Hadin 55)
HT: 0-0

Jan15 - Dhaka
Malaysia XI 1 (Nor Fazli 82)
Sri Lanka 2 (Bandara 19, Sanjeewa 63)
HT: 0-1

Jan15 - Dhaka
Bangladesh 0
Nepal 0

BANGABANDHU GOLD CUP – GROUP A	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bangladesh (Q)	3	1	2	0	5	3	5
Nepal (Q)	3	1	2	0	1	0	5
Sri Lanka	3	1	0	2	4	6	3
Malaysia XI[1]	3	0	2	1	2	3	2

[1] *Malaysia represented by club side Felda United*

Group B

Jan10 - Jessore
Bahrain U-23 1 (J Al Shaikh 23)
Bangladesh U-23 1 (Sifat 19)
HT: 1-1
Sent off: Ali (Bahrain U-23) 89

Jan11 - Jessore
Maldives 3 (Easa 4, Naiz 38, 80)
Cambodia 2 (Vandeth 15, Dina 43)
HT: 2-2

Jan14 - Dhaka
Cambodia 0
Bahrain U-23 1 (A Al Shaikh 11)
HT: 0-1

Jan14 - Dhaka
Bangladesh U-23 0
Maldives 2 (Easa 15, Imaz 23)
HT: 0-2

Jan16 - Dhaka
Bahrain U-23 1 (Ali 58)
Maldives 1 (Imaz 18)
HT: 0-1

Jan16 - Dhaka
Cambodia 1 (Dina 71)
Bangladesh U-23 0
HT: 0-0

BANGABANDHU GOLD CUP – GROUP B	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Maldives (Q)	3	2	1	0	6	3	7
Bahrain U23 (Q)	3	1	2	0	3	2	5
Cambodia	3	1	0	2	3	4	3
Bang'desh U23	3	0	1	2	1	4	1

● *The top 2 in both groups qualified for the semi-finals*

Semi-finals

Jan18 - Dhaka
Bangladesh 0
Bahrain U-23 1 (Al Hooti 45)
HT: 0-1

Jan19 - Dhaka
Maldives 1 (Nashid 77)
Nepal 4 (N Shrestha 31, 62, 90+1, B Rai 52)
HT: 0-1

Final

Jan 22 - Dhaka
Bahrain U-23 0
Nepal 3 (Magar 5, B Rai 87, N Shrestha 90+1)
HT: 0-1
Sent off: Al Thawai 81, Abdul Aziz 90+2 (both Bahrain U-23); S Lama (Nepal) 81

FRIENDLIES

Wednesday, January 27

Jan 27 - Aswan
Egypt 0
Jordan 1 (Samir 19)
HT: 0-1
Egypt: Ekramy - Gaber (Hany 75), Rabia, Dewidar, A Fathy, M Fathy, El Said (Hefny 46), Ghaly, El Sayed, Sobhy, Raouf (Gamal 61).
Jordan: Shafi - Al Dmeiri, Khattab, Bani Yaseen, Zahran, Abdelrahman, Elias, Al Bakhit, Samir (Alameh 90+6), Alawneh (Alnaber 67), Al Rawashdeh (Shishani 90).

Jan 27 - Managua
Nicaragua 1 (Leguias 14)
Honduras 3 (Mendez 57, Alvarado pen 83, Casco og 89)
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 5,000. **Ref:** Davila (Nic)
Nicaragua: D Tellez - Copete, Casco, Quijano, Rosas, Montiel, B Garcia (Reyes 39; Pavon 69), Chavarria (Veliz 84), Cuadra (Somarriba 69), M Lopez (Peralta 88), Leguias (O Lopez 86).
Sent off: Copete 83.
Honduras: Escober - Crisanto, H Figueroa, Velasquez, Alvarado, Mendez (Oseguera 86), A Mejia, Morazan (Acosta 55), Andino (C Mejia 55), Elis (Quioto 65), Tejeda (Hernandez 71).

Friday, January 29

Jan 29 - Aswan
Egypt 2 (Gabr 31, Morsi 75)
Libya 0
HT: 1-0
Egypt: A El Shenawy - Hany, Hegazy (M Magdy 79), Gabr, Rahil (Nassef 46), I Salah, El Said (S Soliman 61), Hefny (A Magdy 46), Zakaria, Kahraba (Mamdouh 67), Mohsen (Morsi 61).
Libya: Nashnoush - Farhat, R Ellafi (E M Al Masri 53), Moeen (Chtiba 53), Al Gamal, El Trbi, Tabal, Al Borki (Essaghir 79), Al Khritli, Al Badri (Sabbou 68), Al Ghanodi.

Sunday, January 31

Jan 31 - Carson
United States 3 (Altidore 20, Orozco 59, Birnbaum 90)
Iceland 2 (Steindorsson 13, Sigurdarson 48)
HT: 1-1. **Att:** 8,803. **Ref:** Solis (CR)
United States: Robles - Evans (Birnbaum 46), Orozco, Besler, Acosta, Bradley, Jones (Tchani 71), Finlay (Nagbe 61), Nguyen, Zardes (Kiesewetter 75), Altidore (Morris 75).
Iceland: Kristinsson - B Saevarsson, Jonasson (Hermannsson 46), Fjoluson, A Skulason (A Johannesson 84), Sigurdarson, Thorarinsson (D Johannesson 46), R Sigurjonsson, Steindorsson (Thrandarson 46), Smarason, Gudjohnsen (Finnbogason 71).

Tuesday, February 2

Feb 2 - Barinas
Venezuela 1 (Angel 89)
Costa Rica 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Sanchez (Col)
Venezuela: Contreras - Faria, Benitez, Angel, Villanueva, Flores (Garcia 90+3), Figuera (Acosta 78), Soteldo, L Gonzalez (Pena 80), Moreno (Ponce 54), Blanco.
Costa Rica: Madrigal - Mena (Smith 78), Waston, Acosta, Francis, Miranda, Alvarado (Sanchez 90+4), Azofeifa (Valle 77), Venegas, Colindres (Cunningham 56), Ramirez.
Sent off: Venegas 42, Ramirez 65.

Friday, February 5

Feb 5 - Riffa
Bahrain 2 (Eissa 15, Yusuf 45)
Lebanon 0
HT: 2-0
Bahrain: Al Doseri - Mansour (Al Barri 70), Eissa (Al Asfoor 85), Adnan, Shallal, Ghuloom, Yusuf (Abdeljabar 70), Al Aswad, Al Hooti, Adel (Mirza 70), Saeed.
Lebanon: Khalil (Bittar 46) - Moghrabi (Hanineh 46), Siblini (Al Mal 76), Jalloul (Awada 64), Kojok, Mansour, Chaito (H Oumari 70), Antar (Abbas Ahmed Atwi 46), M Haidar (Al Zain 87), Zein Tahan, Y Mohamad.

Feb 5 - Saly
Senegal 2 (Mbengue 69, Gueye 72)
Mauritania 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Ndiaye (Sen)
Senegal: Thioub (P S Ndiaye 58) - Kante (E Cisse 80), M Traore (A Mendy 50), A Sylla, Mbengue, O Thioune, Cissokho (N Mendy 58), S Sane, Gueye, I Diop (A Mbodj 50), Nguer (Abdoulaye Ba 53).
Mauritania: Salahdine - Abou Sy, Varajou, Ly, Wade, Baghayoko (Gueye 72), Denna, Yali, Moctar (Bella 69), Niass, Abderrahmane Sy (Ndiaye 66). *Sent off: Abou Sy 67.*

Feb 5 - Carson
United States 1 (Altidore 90)
Canada 0
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 9,274. **Ref:** Mejia (ESv)
United States: Bingham - Birnbaum, Jones, Besler, Acosta (Vincent 46), Zardes (Kiesewetter 61), Bradley, Diskerud (Trapp 77), Nguyen (Nagbe 61), Morris (Finlay 88), Altidore (Kitchen 90+2).
Canada: Crepeau - Ledgerwood (Bekker 46), Lefevre (Henry 46), Vitoria, De Jong (Dixon 85), Straith, De Guzman, Johnson, Froese (Nakajima-Farran 46), Larin (Adekugbe 78), Akindele (Hume 72).

Saturday, February 6

Feb 6 - Vieux-Habitants
Guadeloupe 1 (Dan 50)
Martinique 1 (Delem 66)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Antoine (Gdp)
Guadeloupe: Tejou (Julan 4) - Phobere, Valmy (Tacita 63), Laurence, Babel, Osseux, Romain (Cesaire-Gedeon 88), Lafortune (Francillonne 70), Dan (Hanany 79), Vouteau (Roche 63), Annerose (Labuthie 74).
Martinique: Vermignon (Chauvet 76) - Telga (Zaire 46), Dondon (Jougon 57), Delem, Lepel (Bodezon 46), Herelle, Cretinoir, Abaul (Boriel 90), Nedra (Saint-Omer 80), Vitulin (Pignet 57), Joseph-Louis (Pastel 46).

Wednesday, February 10

Feb10 - Guatemala City
Guatemala 3 (Tinoco 20, Marquez 42, L Martinez 56)
Honduras 1 (Quioto 3)
HT: 2-1. **Ref:** Cornejo (ESv)
Guatemala: P Motta - Jimenez, H Lopez, Castrillo (D Lopez 74), Rafael Morales, Icute (Matta 65), Saravia, Marquez (Samayoa 65), Longo (F Lopez 71), L Martinez (Arias 71), Tinoco (O Martinez 78).
Honduras: Valladares - Beckeles, Johnny Palacios (Mendez 46), H Figueroa, Alvarado (Oseguera 63), Leveron, Espinoza, Acosta (Claros 61), Andino (Elis 60), Quioto (C Mejia 75), Hernandez (Colon 31).

Feb10 - Miami, USA
Mexico 2 (Duenas 73, Pizarro 86)
Senegal 0
HT: 0-0
Mexico: J J Corona - Y Corona (Salcedo 46), Araujo (Rivas 46), Flores (I Jimenez 67), Torres Nilo, Zavala (Molina 59), Duenas, Montes (Pizarro 46), Damm (Ramirez 72), Lozano, E Herrera.
Senegal: P S Ndiaye - Kante, Mbengue, M Sylla, O Thioune, Cissokho (N Diallo 63), Mendy, E Cisse, A Mbodj (I Diop 53), S Sane (Bocande 89), Gueye.

Sunday, February 14

Feb14 - Dubai, UAE
Uzbekistan 2 (Shomurodov 5, Djeparov 40)
Lebanon 0
HT: 2-0

2018 WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

SOUTH AMERICA section

● *4.5 finals places available*

2018 WC QUALS – SOUTH AMERICA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ecuador	4	4	0	0	9	2	12
Uruguay	4	3	0	1	9	2	9
Brazil	4	2	1	1	7	4	7
Paraguay	4	2	1	1	3	2	7
Chile	4	2	1	1	7	7	7
Argentina	4	1	2	1	2	3	5
Colombia	4	1	1	2	3	5	4
Bolivia	4	1	0	3	5	8	3
Peru	4	1	0	3	4	9	3
Venezuela	4	0	0	4	4	11	0

Each team will play 18 games (9x2)

● *The top 4 will qualify for the finals; the 5th-placed country will meet the Oceania play-off round winner in a play-off for a place in the finals*

Results to date

2015

Oct 8	Argentina v Ecuador	0-2
	Bolivia v Uruguay	0-2
	Chile v Brazil	2-0
	Colombia v Peru	2-0
	Venezuela v Paraguay	0-1
Oct 13	Brazil v Venezuela	3-1
	Ecuador v Bolivia	2-0
	Paraguay v Argentina	0-0
	Peru v Chile	3-4
	Uruguay v Colombia	3-0
Nov 12	Bolivia v Venezuela	4-2
	Chile v Colombia	1-1
	Ecuador v Uruguay	2-1
Nov 13	Argentina v Brazil	1-1
	Peru v Paraguay	1-0
Nov 17	Brazil v Peru	3-0
	Colombia v Argentina	0-1
	Paraguay v Bolivia	2-1
	Uruguay v Chile	3-0
	Venezuela v Ecuador	1-3

Next 2 rounds of fixtures

2016

Mar 24	Bolivia v Colombia
	Chile v Argentina
	Ecuador v Paraguay
	Peru v Venezuela
Mar 25	Brazil v Uruguay
Mar 29	Argentina v Bolivia
	Colombia v Ecuador
	Paraguay v Brazil
	Uruguay v Peru
	Venezuela v Chile

Games to be completed by Oct 2017

ASIA section

● *4.5 finals places available*

2nd round

Group A

2018 WC QUALS – ASIA – 2ND ROUND: GP A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Saudi Arabia	6	5	1	0	25	3	16
UAE	6	4	1	1	22	3	13
Palestine	6	2	3	1	15	4	9
Malaysia	7	1	1	5	3	28	4
East Timor	7	0	2	5	2	29	2

Full results & fixtures

2015

Jun 11	Malaysia v East Timor	1-1
	Saudi Arabia v Palestine	3-2
Jun 15	East Timor v UAE	0-1
	Malaysia v Palestine	0-6
Sep 3	Saudi Arabia v East Timor	7-0
	UAE v Malaysia	10-0
Sep 8	Malaysia v S Arabia (awarded)	0-3
	Palestine v UAE	0-0
Oct 8	East Timor v Palestine	1-1
	Saudi Arabia v UAE	2-1
Oct 13	East Timor v Malaysia	0-1
Nov 9	Palestine v Saudi Arabia	0-0
Nov 12	Palestine v Malaysia	6-0
	UAE v East Timor	8-0
Nov 17	East Timor v Saudi Arabia	0-10
	Malaysia v UAE	1-2

2016

Mar 24	Saudi Arabia v Malaysia
	UAE v Palestine
Mar 29	Palestine v East Timor
	UAE v Saudi Arabia

Group B

2018 WC QUALS – ASIA – 2ND ROUND: GP B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Australia	6	5	0	1	17	3	15
Jordan	6	4	1	1	12	2	13
Kyrgyzstan	7	3	2	2	9	8	11
Tajikistan	6	1	2	3	9	12	5
Bangladesh	7	0	1	6	2	24	1

Full results & fixtures

2015

Jun 11	Bangladesh v Kyrgyzstan	1-3
	Tajikistan v Jordan	1-3
Jun 16	Bangladesh v Tajikistan	1-1
	Kyrgyzstan v Australia	1-2
Sep 3	Australia v Bangladesh	5-0
	Jordan v Kyrgyzstan	0-0
Sep 8	Bangladesh v Jordan	0-4
	Tajikistan v Australia	0-3
Oct 8	Jordan v Australia	2-0
	Kyrgyzstan v Tajikistan	2-2
Oct 13	Jordan v Tajikistan	3-0
	Kyrgyzstan v Bangladesh	2-0
Nov 12	Australia v Kyrgyzstan	3-0
	Tajikistan v Bangladesh	5-0
Nov 17	Bangladesh v Australia	0-4
	Kyrgyzstan v Jordan	1-0

2016

Mar 24	Australia v Tajikistan
	Jordan v Bangladesh
Mar 29	Australia v Jordan
	Tajikistan v Kyrgyzstan

Group C

2018 WC QUALS – ASIA – 2ND ROUND: GP C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Qatar (Q)	6	6	0	0	27	2	18
Hong Kong	7	4	2	1	13	3	14
China	6	3	2	1	21	1	11
Maldives	6	1	0	5	4	14	3
Bhutan	7	0	0	7	3	48	0

Full results & fixtures

2015

Jun 11	Hong Kong v Bhutan	7-0
	Maldives v Qatar	0-1
Jun 16	Bhutan v China	0-6
	Hong Kong v Maldives	2-0
Sep 3	China v Hong Kong	0-0
	Qatar v Bhutan	15-0
Sep 8	Hong Kong v Qatar	2-3
	Maldives v China	0-3
Oct 8	Bhutan v Maldives	3-4
	Qatar v China	1-0
Oct 13	Bhutan v Hong Kong	0-1
	Qatar v Maldives	4-0
Nov 12	China v Bhutan	12-0
	Maldives v Hong Kong	0-1
Nov 17	Bhutan v Qatar	0-3
	Hong Kong v China	0-0

2016

Mar 24	China v Maldives
	Qatar v Hong Kong
Mar 29	China v Qatar
	Maldives v Bhutan

Group D

2018 WC QUALS – ASIA – 2ND ROUND: GP D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Iran	6	4	2	0	20	3	14
Oman	6	3	2	1	10	5	11
Turkmenistan	7	3	1	3	8	10	10
Guam	7	2	1	4	3	15	7
India	6	1	0	5	4	12	3

Full results & fixtures

2015

Jun 11	Guam v Turkmenistan	1-0
	India v Oman	1-2
Jun 16	Guam v India	2-1
	Turkmenistan v Iran	1-1
Sep 3	Iran v Guam	6-0
	Oman v Turkmenistan	3-1
Sep 8	Guam v Oman	0-0
	India v Iran	0-3
Oct 8	Oman v Iran	1-1
	Turkmenistan v India	2-1
Oct 13	Oman v India	3-0
	Turkmenistan v Guam	1-0
Nov 12	India v Guam	1-0
	Iran v Turkmenistan	3-1
Nov 17	Guam v Iran	0-6
	Turkmenistan v Oman	2-1

2016

Mar 24	Iran v India
	Oman v Guam
Mar 29	India v Turkmenistan
	Iran v Oman

Group E

2018 WC QUALS – ASIA – 2ND ROUND: GP E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Japan	6	5	1	0	17	0	16
Syria	6	5	0	1	20	6	15
Singapore	7	3	1	3	8	7	10
Afghanistan	6	2	0	4	6	18	6
Cambodia	7	0	0	7	1	21	0

Full results & fixtures

2015

Jun 11	Afghanistan v Syria	0-6
	Cambodia v Singapore	0-4
Jun 16	Cambodia v Afghanistan	0-1
	Japan v Singapore	0-0
Sep 3	Japan v Cambodia	3-0
	Syria v Singapore	1-0
Sep 8	Afghanistan v Japan	0-6
	Cambodia v Syria	0-6
Oct 8	Singapore v Afghanistan	1-0
	Syria v Japan	0-3
Oct 13	Singapore v Cambodia	2-1
	Syria v Afghanistan	5-2
Nov 12	Afghanistan v Cambodia	3-0
	Singapore v Japan	0-3
Nov 17	Cambodia v Japan	0-2
	Singapore v Syria	1-2

2016

Mar 24	Japan v Afghanistan
	Syria v Cambodia
Mar 29	Afghanistan v Singapore
	Japan v Syria

Group F

2018 WC QUALS – ASIA – 2ND ROUND: GP F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Thailand	5	4	1	0	12	4	13
Iraq	4	2	2	0	10	4	8
Vietnam	4	1	1	2	3	6	4
Taiwan	5	0	0	5	4	15	0

Indonesia excluded after FA was suspended by FIFA for government interference

Full results & fixtures

2015

May 24	Thailand v Vietnam	1-0
Jun 16	Taiwan v Thailand	0-2
Sep 3	Iraq v Taiwan	5-1
Sep 8	Taiwan v Vietnam	1-2
	Thailand v Iraq	2-2
Oct 8	Vietnam v Iraq	1-1
Oct 13	Vietnam v Thailand	0-3
Nov 12	Thailand v Taiwan	4-2
Nov 17	Taiwan v Iraq	0-2

2016

Mar 24	Iraq v Thailand
	Vietnam v Taiwan
Mar 29	Iraq v Vietnam

Group G

2018 WC QUALS – ASIA – 2ND ROUND: GP G

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sth Korea (Q)	6	6	0	0	23	0	18
Kuwait	6	3	1	2	12	4	10
Lebanon	6	3	1	2	11	4	10
Myanmar	7	2	1	4	8	20	7
Laos	7	0	1	6	3	29	1

Full results & fixtures

2015

Jun 11	Laos v Myanmar	2-2
	Lebanon v Kuwait	0-1
Jun 16	Laos v Lebanon	0-2
	Myanmar v South Korea	0-2
Sep 3	Kuwait v Myanmar	9-0
	South Korea v Laos	8-0
Sep 8	Laos v Kuwait	0-2
	Lebanon v South Korea	0-3
Oct 8	Kuwait v South Korea	0-1
	Myanmar v Lebanon	0-2
Oct 13	Kuwait v Lebanon	0-0
	Myanmar v Laos	3-1
Nov 12	Lebanon v Laos	7-0
	South Korea v Myanmar	4-0
Nov 17	Laos v South Korea	0-5
	Myanmar v Kuwait (awarded)	3-0

2016

Mar 24	Kuwait v Laos
	South Korea v Lebanon
Mar 29	Lebanon v Myanmar
	South Korea v Kuwait

Group H

2018 WC QUALS – ASIA – 2ND ROUND: GP H

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
North Korea	7	5	1	1	12	5	16
Uzbekistan	6	5	0	1	18	7	15
Philippines	6	2	1	3	5	9	7
Bahrain	6	2	0	4	7	9	6
Yemen	7	1	0	6	2	14	3

Full results & fixtures

2015

Jun 11	Philippines v Bahrain	2-1
	Yemen v N Korea (awarded)	0-3
Jun 16	North Korea v Uzbekistan	4-2
	Yemen v Philippines	0-2
Sep 3	Bahrain v North Korea	0-1
	Uzbekistan v Yemen	1-0
Sep 8	Philippines v Uzbekistan	1-5
	Yemen v Bahrain	0-4
Oct 8	Bahrain v Uzbekistan	0-4
	North Korea v Philippines	0-0
Oct 13	Bahrain v Philippines	2-0
	North Korea v Yemen	1-0
Nov 12	Philippines v Yemen	0-1
	Uzbekistan v North Korea	3-1
Nov 17	North Korea v Bahrain	2-0
	Yemen v Uzbekistan	1-3

2016

Mar 24	Bahrain v Yemen
	Uzbekistan v Philippines
Mar 29	Philippines v North Korea
	Uzbekistan v Bahrain

Each team will play 8 games (4x2), except Group F – 6 games (3x2)

● *The 8 group winners and the 4 runners-up with the best record will qualify for the 3rd round*

3rd round

The 12 qualifiers will be drawn into 2 6-team groups (games to be played Aug 2016-Sep 2017)

● *The top 2 in both groups will qualify for the finals; the 2 3rd-placed countries will meet in the Asia section play-off, the winner of which will meet the 4th-placed CONCACAF country in a play-off for a place in the finals*

AFRICA section

● *5 finals places available*

3rd round

The 20 qualifiers for this round are:

Algeria	**Burkina Faso**
Cameroon	**Cape Verde Islands**
Congo	**DR Congo**
Egypt	**Gabon**
Ghana	**Guinea**
Ivory Coast	**Libya**
Mali	**Morocco**
Nigeria	**Senegal**
South Africa	**Tunisia**
Uganda	**Zambia**

They will be drawn into 5 4-team groups on June 24, 2016 (games to be played Oct 2016-Nov 2017)

● *The 5 group winners will qualify for the finals*

CONCACAF section

● *3.5 finals places available*

4th round

Group A

2018 WC QUALS – CONCACAF – 4TH RND: GP A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mexico	2	2	0	0	5	0	6
Canada	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
El Salvador	2	0	1	1	0	3	1
Honduras	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

Full results & fixtures

2015

Nov 13	Canada v Honduras	1-0
	Mexico v El Salvador	3-0
Nov 17	El Salvador v Canada	0-0
	Honduras v Mexico	0-2

2016

Mar 25	Canada v Mexico
	El Salvador v Honduras
Mar 29	Honduras v El Salvador
	Mexico v Canada
Sep 2	El Salvador v Mexico
	Honduras v Canada
Sep 6	Canada v El Salvador
	Mexico v Honduras

Group B

2018 WC QUALS – CONCACAF – 4TH RND: GP B	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Costa Rica	2	2	0	0	3	1	6
Panama	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Jamaica	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Haiti	2	0	0	2	0	2	0

Full results & fixtures
2015
Nov 13 Costa Rica v Haiti 1-0
Jamaica v Panama 0-2
Nov 17 Haiti v Jamaica 0-1
Panama v Costa Rica 1-2
2016
Mar 25 Haiti v Panama
Jamaica v Costa Rica
Mar 29 Costa Rica v Jamaica
Panama v Haiti
Sep 2 Haiti v Costa Rica
Panama v Jamaica
Sep 6 Costa Rica v Panama
Jamaica v Haiti

Group C

2018 WC QUALS – CONCACAF – 4TH RND: GP C	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
United States	2	1	1	0	6	1	4
Trinidad & T	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Guatemala	2	1	0	1	5	2	3
St Vincent & G	2	0	0	2	1	10	0

Full results & fixtures
2015
Nov 13 Guatemala v Trinidad & Tob 1-2
United States v St Vincent & G 6-1
Nov 17 St Vincent & G v Guatemala 0-4
Trinidad & Tob v United States 0-0
2016
Mar 25 Guatemala v United States
St Vincent & G v Trinidad & Tob
Mar 29 Trinidad & Tob v St Vincent & G
United States v Guatemala
Sep 2 St Vincent & G v United States
Trinidad & Tob v Guatemala
Sep 6 Guatemala v St Vincent & G
United States v Trinidad & Tob

Each team will play 6 games (3x2)

● *The top 2 in each group will qualify for the 5th round*

5th round

The 6 qualifiers will form a single group (games to be played Nov 2016-Oct 2017)
● *The top 3 will qualify for the finals; the 4th-placed country will meet the winner of the Asia section play-off in a play-off for a place in the finals*

OCEANIA section

● *0.5 finals places available*

2nd round draw

Group A

New Caledonia **Papua New Guinea**
Samoa **Tahiti**

Full fixtures
2016
May 28 Tahiti v Samoa
Papua New Guinea v New Caledonia
May 31 New Caledonia v Samoa
Papua New Guinea v Tahiti
Jun 4 Tahiti v New Caledonia
Papua New Guinea v Samoa

Group B

Fiji **New Zealand**
Solomon Islands **Vanuatu**

Full fixtures
2016
May 29 New Zealand v Fiji
Vanuatu v Solomon Islands
Jun 1 Vanuatu v New Zealand
Solomon Islands v Fiji
Jun 5 New Zealand v Solomon Islands
Fiji v Vanuatu

● *The top 3 in both groups will qualify for the 3rd round*

3rd round

The 6 qualifiers will be drawn into 2 3-team groups (games to be played Mar 2017-Oct 2017)
● *The 2 group winners will qualify for the play-off round*

Play-off round

The 2 qualifiers will meet in a play-off (games to be played in Nov 2017)
● *The play-off round winner will meet the 5th-placed South American country in a play-off for a place in the finals*

EUROPE section

● *13 finals places available (excluding the place for hosts* **Russia**, *who qualify automatically)*

Draw

Group A

Belarus **Bulgaria**
France **Holland**
Luxembourg **Sweden**

1st 4 rounds of fixtures
2016
Sep 6 Belarus v France
Bulgaria v Luxembourg
Sweden v Holland
Oct 7 France v Bulgaria
Holland v Belarus
Luxembourg v Sweden
Oct 10 Belarus v Luxembourg
Holland v France
Sweden v Bulgaria
Nov 13 Bulgaria v Belarus
France v Sweden
Luxembourg v Holland

Group B

Andorra **Faroe Islands**
Hungary **Latvia**
Portugal **Switzerland**

1st 4 rounds of fixtures
2016
Sep 6 Andorra v Latvia
Faroe Islands v Hungary
Switzerland v Portugal
Oct 7 Hungary v Switzerland
Latvia v Faroe Islands
Portugal v Andorra
Oct 10 Andorra v Switzerland
Faroe Islands v Portugal
Latvia v Hungary
Nov 13 Hungary v Andorra
Portugal v Latvia
Switzerland v Faroe Islands

Group C

Azerbaijan **Czech Republic**
Germany **Northern Ireland**
Norway **San Marino**

1st 4 rounds of fixtures
2016
Sep 4 Czech Republic v Northern Ireland
Norway v Germany
San Marino v Azerbaijan
Oct 8 Azerbaijan v Norway
Germany v Czech Republic
Northern Ireland v San Marino
Oct 11 Czech Republic v Azerbaijan
Germany v Northern Ireland
Norway v San Marino
Nov 11 Czech Republic v Norway
Northern Ireland v Azerbaijan
San Marino v Germany

Group D

Austria **Georgia**
Moldova **Republic of Ireland**
Serbia **Wales**

1st 4 rounds of fixtures
2016
Sep 5 Georgia v Austria
Serbia v Republic of Ireland
Wales v Moldova
Oct 6 Austria v Wales
Moldova v Serbia
Republic of Ireland v Georgia
Oct 9 Moldova v Republic of Ireland
Serbia v Austria
Wales v Georgia
Nov 12 Austria v Republic of Ireland
Georgia v Moldova
Wales v Serbia

Group E

Armenia **Denmark**
Kazakhstan **Montenegro**
Poland **Romania**

1st 4 rounds of fixtures
2016
Sep 4 Denmark v Armenia
Kazakhstan v Poland
Romania v Montenegro
Oct 8 Armenia v Romania
Montenegro v Kazakhstan
Poland v Denmark
Oct 11 Denmark v Montenegro
Kazakhstan v Romania
Poland v Armenia
Nov 11 Armenia v Montenegro
Denmark v Kazakhstan
Romania v Poland

Group F

England **Lithuania**
Malta **Scotland**
Slovakia **Slovenia**

1st 4 rounds of fixtures
2016
Sep 4 Lithuania v Slovenia
Malta v Scotland
Slovakia v England
Oct 8 England v Malta
Scotland v Lithuania
Slovenia v Slovakia
Oct 11 Lithuania v Malta
Slovakia v Scotland
Slovenia v England
Nov 11 England v Scotland
Malta v Slovenia
Slovakia v Lithuania

Group G

Albania **Israel**
Italy **Liechtenstein**
Macedonia **Spain**

1st 4 rounds of fixtures
2016
Sep 5 Albania v Macedonia
Israel v Italy
Spain v Liechtenstein
Oct 6 Italy v Spain
Liechtenstein v Albania
Macedonia v Israel
Oct 9 Albania v Spain
Israel v Liechtenstein
Macedonia v Italy
Nov 12 Albania v Israel
Liechtenstein v Italy
Spain v Macedonia

Group H

Belgium **Bosnia-Herzegovina**
Cyprus **Estonia**
Greece

1st 4 rounds of fixtures
2016
Sep 6 Bosnia-Herzegovina v Estonia
Cyprus v Belgium
Oct 7 Belgium v Bosnia-Herzegovina
Greece v Cyprus
Oct 10 Bosnia-Herzegovina v Cyprus
Estonia v Greece
Nov 13 Belgium v Estonia
Greece v Bosnia-Herzegovina

Group I

Croatia **Finland**
Iceland **Turkey**
Ukraine

1st 4 rounds of fixtures
2016
Sep 5 Croatia v Turkey
Ukraine v Iceland
Oct 6 Iceland v Finland
Turkey v Ukraine
Oct 9 Finland v Croatia
Iceland v Turkey
Nov 12 Croatia v Iceland
Ukraine v Finland

Each team will play 10 games (5x2), except Groups H & I – 8 games (4x2); games to be completed by Oct 2017

● *The 9 group winners will qualify for the finals; the 8 runners-up with the best record will be paired in 4 play-offs, the winners of which will also qualify for the finals*

2017 AFRICAN NATIONS CUP QUALS

Tables & remaining fixtures (all 2016)

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Togo	2	2	0	0	4	1	6
Liberia	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Tunisia	2	1	0	1	8	2	3
Djibouti	2	0	0	2	1	10	0

Mar 23-26 Djibouti v Liberia; Tunisia v Togo
Mar 26-29 Liberia v Djibouti; Togo v Tunisia
Jun 3-5 Djibouti v Tunisia; Liberia v Togo
Sep 2-4 Togo v Djibouti; Tunisia v Liberia

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Angola	2	1	1	0	4	0	4
Cent Af Rep	2	1	0	1	2	4	3
DR Congo	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Madagascar	2	0	1	1	1	2	1

Mar 23-26 DR Congo v Angola;
Madagascar v Central African Rep
Mar 26-29 Angola v DR Congo;
Central African Rep v Madagascar
Jun 3-5 Central African Rep v Angola;
Madagascar v DR Congo
Sep 2-4 Angola v Madagascar;
DR Congo v Central African Rep

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mali	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
South Sudan	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Benin	2	0	2	0	2	2	2
Equat Guinea	2	0	1	1	1	2	1

Mar 23-26 Mali v Eq Guinea; S Sudan v Benin
Mar 26-29 Benin v S Sudan; Eq Guinea v Mali
Jun 3-5 Benin v Eq Guinea; S Sudan v Mali
Sep 2-4 Eq Guinea v S Sudan; Mali v Benin

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Uganda	2	2	0	0	3	0	6
Botswana	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Burkina Faso	2	1	0	1	2	1	3
Comoros	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

Mar 23-26 Burkina Faso v Uganda;
Comoros v Botswana
Mar 26-29 Botswana v Comoros;
Uganda v Burkina Faso
Jun 3-5 Botswana v Uganda;
Comoros v Burkina Faso
Sep 2-4 Burkina Faso v Botswana;
Uganda v Comoros

Group E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Congo	2	1	1	0	5	3	4
Zambia	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Kenya	2	0	1	1	2	3	1
Guinea-Bissau	2	0	1	1	2	4	1

Mar 23-26 G-Bissau v Kenya; Zambia v Congo
Mar 26-29 Congo v Zambia; Kenya v G-Bissau
Jun 3-5 G-Bissau v Zambia; Kenya v Congo
Sep 2-4 Congo v G-Bissau; Zambia v Kenya

Group F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cape Verde	2	2	0	0	9	2	6
Morocco	2	2	0	0	4	0	6
Libya	2	0	0	2	1	3	0
Sao Tome	2	0	0	2	1	10	0

Mar 23-26 C Verde v Morocco; S Tome v Libya
Mar 26-29 Libya v S Tome; Morocco v C Verde
Jun 3-5 Libya v Morocco; S Tome v C Verde
Sep 2-4 C Verde v Libya; Morocco v S Tome

Group G

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Egypt	2	2	0	0	8	1	6
Nigeria	2	1	1	0	2	0	4
Tanzania	2	0	1	1	0	3	1
Chad	2	0	0	2	1	7	0

Mar 23-26 Chad v Tanzania; Nigeria v Egypt
Mar 26-29 Egypt v Nigeria; Tanzania v Chad
Jun 3-5 Chad v Nigeria; Tanzania v Egypt
Sep 2-4 Egypt v Chad; Nigeria v Tanzania

Group H

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ghana	2	2	0	0	8	1	6
Rwanda	2	1	0	1	1	1	3
Mauritius	2	1	0	1	2	7	3
Mozambique	2	0	0	2	0	2	0

Mar 23-26 Ghana v Mozambique; Mauritius v Rwanda
Mar 26-29 Mozambique v Ghana; Rwanda v Mauritius
Jun 3-5 Mauritius v Ghana; Rwanda v Mozambique
Sep 2-4 Ghana v Rwanda; Mozambique v Mauritius

Group I

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sudan	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Ivory Coast	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
Sierra Leone	2	0	1	1	0	1	1

Mar 23-26 Ivory Coast v Sudan
Mar 26-29 Sudan v Ivory Coast
Jun 3-5 Sierra Leone v Sudan
Sep 2-4 Ivory Coast v Sierra Leone

Group J

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Algeria	2	2	0	0	7	1	6
Ethiopia	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Seychelles	2	0	1	1	1	5	1
Lesotho	2	0	0	2	2	5	0

Mar 23-26 Algeria v Ethiopia; Seychelles v Lesotho
Mar 26-29 Ethiopia v Algeria; Lesotho v Seychelles
Jun 3-5 Lesotho v Ethiopia; Seychelles v Algeria
Sep 2-4 Algeria v Lesotho; Ethiopia v Seychelles

Group K

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Senegal	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
Burundi	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Niger	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Namibia	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

Mar 23-26 Burundi v Namibia; Senegal v Niger
Mar 26-29 Namibia v Burundi; Niger v Senegal
Jun 3-5 Burundi v Senegal; Namibia v Niger
Sep 2-4 Niger v Burundi; Senegal v Namibia

Group L

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Swaziland	2	1	1	0	4	3	4
Zimbabwe	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Malawi	2	0	1	1	3	4	1
Guinea	2	0	1	1	2	3	1

Mar 23-26 Guinea v Malawi; Swaziland v Zimbabwe
Mar 26-29 Malawi v Guinea; Zimbabwe v Swaziland
Jun 3-5 Swaziland v Guinea; Zimbabwe v Malawi
Sep 2-4 Guinea v Zimbabwe; Malawi v Swaziland

Group M

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cameroon	2	2	0	0	2	0	6
Mauritania	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Gambia	2	0	1	1	0	1	1
South Africa	2	0	1	1	1	3	1

Mar 23-26 Cameroon v South Africa; Mauritania v Gambia
Mar 26-29 Gambia v Mauritania; South Africa v Cameroon
Jun 3-5 Gambia v South Africa; Mauritania v Cameroon
Sep 2-4 Cameroon v Gambia; South Africa v Mauritania

● *The13 group winners and the 2 runners-up with the best record (excluding 3-team Group I) will qualify for the16-team finals. Hosts* **Gabon** *qualify automatically*

Club football

SOUTH AMERICA

LIBERTADORES CUP

Preliminary round

1st legs - Feb 2-4; 2nd legs - Feb 9-11

Cesar Vallejo (Per) v Sao Paulo (Bra)
1-1, 0-1 (agg 1-2)
Huracan (Arg) v Caracas (Ven)
1-0, 1-2 (agg 2-2, Huracan on away goals)
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) v Guarani (Par)
1-0, 1-2 (agg 2-2, Independiente on away goals)
Oriente Petrolero (Bol) v Santa Fe (Col)
1-3, 0-3 (agg 1-6)
Puebla (Mex) v Racing (Arg)
2-2, 0-1 (agg 2-3)
River Plate (Uru) v Universidad de Chile (Chl)
2-0, 0-0 (agg 2-0)

● *The winners have qualified for the group stage*

ASIA

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

1st preliminary round

(single-leg tie)
Jan 27: Mohun Bagan (Ind) 3 Tampines Rovers (Sin) 1.

2nd preliminary round

(single-leg ties)
Feb 2: Chonburi (Tha) 3 Yangon United (Mya) 2 (aet); Hanoi T&T (Vie) 1 Kitchee (HK) 0; Muangthong United (Tha) 0 Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mly) 0 (aet, Muangthong 3-0 on pens); Shandong Luneng (Chn) 6 Mohun Bagan 0.

3rd preliminary round

(single-leg ties)
Feb 9: Adelaide United (Aus) 1 Shandong Luneng 2; Al Jazira (UAE) 2 Al Sadd (Qat) 2 (aet, Al Jazira 5-4 on pens); Al Ittihad (Sau) 2 Al Wehdat (Jor) 1; Bunyodkor (Uzb) 2 Al Shabab (UAE) 0; Naft Tehran (Irn) 0 El Jaish (Qat) 2; Pohang Steelers (SKo) 3 Hanoi T&T 0; Shanghai SIPG (Chn) 3 Muangthong United 0; FC Tokyo (Jap) 9 Chonburi 0.

● *The winners have qualified for the group stage*

AFC CUP

2nd qualifying round

(single-leg ties)
Feb 9: Ahli Al Khalil (Pal) 1 Khujand (Taj) 0; Al Hidd (Bhr) 2 K-Electric (Pak) 0; Al Wahda (Syr) 2 Balkan (Tkm) 0; Tripoli (Leb) 0 Alay Osh (Kyr) 0 (aet, Tripoli 7-6 on pens).

● *The winners have qualified for the group stage*

OCEANIA

OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Preliminary round group

Played in the Cook Islands

Jan 26: Utulei Youth (AmS) 2 Kiwi (Soa) 6; Veitongo (Ton) 0 Tupapa Maraerenga (Coo) 7.
Jan 28: Utulei Youth 3 Veitongo 2; Tupapa Maraerenga 1 Kiwi 2.
Jan 30: Tupapa Maraerenga 9 Utulei Youth 1; Kiwi 7 Veitongo 1.

PRELIMINARY ROUND GROUP – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kiwi (Q)	3	3	0	0	15	4	9
Tupapa Mar'ga	3	2	0	1	17	3	6
Utulei Youth	3	1	0	2	6	17	3
Veitongo	3	0	0	3	3	17	0

● *Kiwi have qualified for the group stage*

Group stage draw

Group A
Amicale (Van)
Auckland City (NZ)
Lae City Dwellers (PNG)
Solomon Warriors (Sol)

Group B
Hekari United (PNG)
Lossi (NC)
Suva (Fij)
Team Wellington (NZ)

Group C
Kiwi
Magenta (NC)
Nadi (Fij)
Tefana (Tah)

● *The 3 group winners and the runner-up with the best record will qualify for semi-finals; tournament (group stage and full knockout phase) to be played in New Zealand, Apr 8-23*

CONCACAF

ANGUILLA

2015-16 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Salsa Ballers (C)	8	6	1	1	30	5	19
Diamond	8	5	1	2	21	7	16
Attackers	8	4	1	3	20	15	13
ALHCS Spartan	8	3	1	4	17	17	10
Dock's United	8	0	0	8	3	47	0

Kicks United & Roaring Lions both withdrew from the league before the season started

Previous champions (most recent)

2009-10	Roaring Lions
2010-11	Kicks United
2011-12	Kicks United
2012-13	Attackers
2013-14	n/a
2014-15	Kicks United

ANTIGUA & BARBUDA

2015-16 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Hoppers (C)	18	13	2	3	41	16	41
Grenades	18	11	3	4	33	19	36
Empire	18	9	5	4	34	26	32
Old Road	18	9	3	6	38	24	30
Parham	18	9	3	6	36	23	30
SAP	18	7	4	7	36	31	25
Pigotts Bullets	18	5	6	7	23	28	21
Ottos Rangers[1]	18	6	3	9	30	38	21
Fort Road (R)	18	3	2	13	18	46	11
Five Islands (R)	18	1	3	14	15	53	6

[1]*Enter rel/prom play-off*

Previous champions (most recent)

2009-10	Bassa
2010-11	Parham
2011-12	Old Road
2012-13	Old Road
2013-14	SAP
2014-15	Parham

KEY TO TABLES
(C) = champions
(R) = relegated
(Q) = qualified for next stage

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World Soccer's GREAT MATCHES

JUNE 24, 1990, MILAN: WORLD CUP

West Germany 2 Holland 1

Arch-rivals produce a World Cup classic – despite both sides playing with 10 men for over an hour

All important...Jurgen Klinsmann celebrates putting Germany ahead

Overshadowed by two red cards, the second-round showdown in the San Siro was described by *World Soccer* as "a real World Cup blockbuster, with West Germany deserving a magnificent victory after a fast, skilful and ferocious contest."

The report in the July 1990 edition continued: "A contest which saw the double expulsion of Frank Rijkaard and Rudi Voller after only 21 minutes also saw the most magnificent performance from West Germany's Jurgen Klinsmann.

"No doubt he supplied one of the most outstanding individual displays of any modern World Cup. That he scored the all-important first German goal was not merely his prize, but his right."

The fact that the San Siro was home to West Germany's three Internazionale players as well as Holland's three Milan stars only added to the traditionally intense rivalry between the two nations.

And that intensity reached boiling point when Rijkaard deliberately fouled Voller.

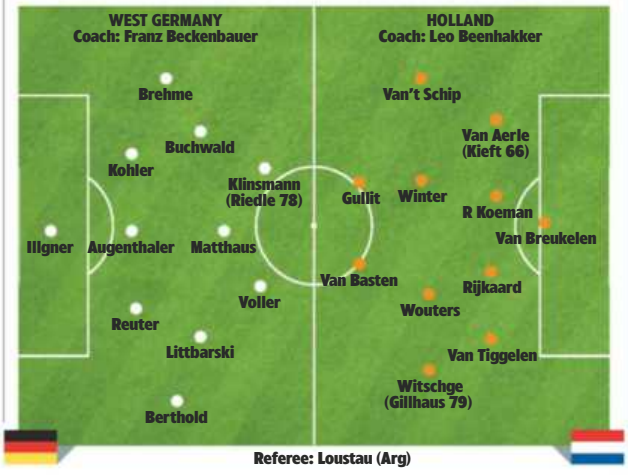
As the German got to his feet, he complained that he had been spat at by his Dutch opponent. Yellow cards were shown to both players – but within a minute the yellows had turned to red.

"[Referee] Loustau showed Voller the red card and sent Rijkaard off to join him in the dressing rooms as Rijkaard [again] spat full into Voller's hair," continued the report "It was an appalling display by Rijkaard. It damaged Holland more than West Germany since an important cog in their creative mechanism was removed."

Poor...Frank Rijkaard spits at Rudi Voller

Despite the shameful scenes, the match opened up into a feast of entertaining, attacking football from both sides.

Hans Van Breukelen made a string of fine saves before Klinsmann managed to beat him and Brehme then secured victory in the last 10 minutes. Ronald Koeman scored a late consolation penalty. WS



Referee: Loustau (Arg)

KEY MOMENTS

Off...Juan Carlos Loustau gets out the red card

11min Pierre Littbarski fires over the bar in West Germany's first attack.

20min Frank Rijkaard fouls Rudi Voller and is shown a yellow card. He then appears to spit at the German, who is also shown a yellow card for complaining to the referee.

21min Voller challenges Hans Van Breukelen and referee Juan Carlos Loustau shows him a red card. Rijkaard is also dismissed for spitting at the expelled Voller.

50min Guido Buchwald breaks down the left, crosses to the near post and Jurgen Klinsmann finishes with a glancing shot into the far corner. **1-0**

76min Klinsmann nearly doubles Germany's lead, following a long pass from Andreas Brehme, but his powerful shot hits the post.

84min Brehme receives a short ball from Buchwald on the corner of the penalty area and curls a shot beyond the dive of Van Breukelen. **2-0**

88min Jurgen Kohler fouls Marco Van Basten in the penalty area and Ronald Koeman steps forward to score from the spot. **2-1**

Clash...Holland full-back Adri Van Tiggelen challenges Jurgen Klinsmann

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